

**DOE Fundamentals**

**NUCLEAR PHYSICS AND REACTOR THEORY**

**Module 1**  
**Atomic and Nuclear Physics**

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**OBJECTIVES****TERMINAL OBJECTIVE**

- 1.0 Given sufficient information, **DESCRIBE** atoms, including components, structure, and nomenclature.

**ENABLING OBJECTIVES**

- 1.1 **STATE** the characteristics of the following atomic particles, including mass, charge, and location within the atom:
- Proton
  - Neutron
  - Electron
- 1.2 **DESCRIBE** the Bohr model of an atom.
- 1.3 **DEFINE** the following terms:
- Nuclide
  - Isotope
  - Atomic number
  - Mass number
- 1.4 Given the standard  ${}^A_ZX$  notation for a particular nuclide, **DETERMINE** the following:
- Number of protons
  - Number of neutrons
  - Number of electrons
- 1.5 **DESCRIBE** the three forces that act on particles within the nucleus and affect the stability of the nucleus.
- 1.6 **DEFINE** the following terms:
- Enriched uranium
  - Depleted uranium
- 1.7 **DEFINE** the following terms:
- Mass defect
  - Binding energy
- 1.8 Given the atomic mass for a nuclide and the atomic masses of neutrons, protons, and electrons, **CALCULATE** the mass defect and binding energy of the nuclide.

**TERMINAL OBJECTIVE**

- 2.0 Given necessary references, **DESCRIBE** the various modes of radioactive decay.

**ENABLING OBJECTIVES**

- 2.1 **DESCRIBE** the following processes:
- a. Alpha decay
  - b. Beta-minus decay
  - c. Beta-plus decay
  - d. Electron capture
  - e. Internal conversions
  - f. Isomeric transitions
- 2.2 Given a Chart of the Nuclides, **WRITE** the radioactive decay chain for a nuclide.
- 2.3 **EXPLAIN** why one or more gamma rays typically accompany particle emission.
- 2.4 Given the stability curve on the Chart of the Nuclides, **DETERMINE** the type of radioactive decay that the nuclides in each region of the chart will typically undergo.
- 2.5 **DEFINE** the following terms:
- a. Radioactivity
  - b. Curie
  - c. Becquerel
  - d. Radioactive decay constant
  - e. Radioactive half-life
- 2.6 Given the number of atoms and either the half-life or decay constant of a nuclide, **CALCULATE** the activity.
- 2.7 Given the initial activity and the decay constant of a nuclide, **CALCULATE** the activity at any later time.
- 2.8 **CONVERT** between the half-life and decay constant for a nuclide.
- 2.9 Given the Chart of the Nuclides and the original activity, **PLOT** the radioactive decay curve for a nuclide on either linear or semi-log coordinates.
- 2.10 **DEFINE** the following terms:
- a. Radioactive equilibrium
  - b. Transient radioactive equilibrium

**TERMINAL OBJECTIVE**

3.0 Without references, **DESCRIBE** the different nuclear interactions initiated by neutrons.

**ENABLING OBJECTIVES**

- 3.1 **DESCRIBE** the following scattering interactions between a neutron and a nucleus:
- a. Elastic scattering
  - b. Inelastic scattering
- 3.2 **STATE** the conservation laws that apply to an elastic collision between a neutron and a nucleus.
- 3.3 **DESCRIBE** the following reactions where a neutron is absorbed in a nucleus:
- a. Radiative capture
  - b. Particle ejection

**TERMINAL OBJECTIVE**

4.0 Without references, **DESCRIBE** the fission process.

**ENABLING OBJECTIVES**

- 4.1 **EXPLAIN** the fission process using the liquid drop model of a nucleus.
- 4.2 **DEFINE** the following terms:
- a. Excitation energy
  - b. Critical energy
- 4.3 **DEFINE** the following terms:
- a. Fissile material
  - b. Fissionable material
  - c. Fertile material
- 4.4 **DESCRIBE** the processes of transmutation, conversion, and breeding.
- 4.5 **DESCRIBE** the curve of Binding Energy per Nucleon versus mass number and give a qualitative description of the reasons for its shape.
- 4.6 **EXPLAIN** why only the heaviest nuclei are easily fissioned.
- 4.7 **EXPLAIN** why uranium-235 fissions with thermal neutrons and uranium-238 fissions only with fast neutrons.

- 4.8 **CHARACTERIZE** the fission products in terms of mass groupings and radioactivity.
- 4.9 Given the nuclides involved and their masses, **CALCULATE** the energy released from fission.
- 4.10 Given the curve of Binding Energy per Nucleon versus mass number, **CALCULATE** the energy released from fission.

**TERMINAL OBJECTIVE**

- 5.0 Without references, **DESCRIBE** how the various types of radiation interact with matter.

**ENABLING OBJECTIVES**

- 5.1 **DESCRIBE** interactions of the following with matter:
  - a. Alpha particle
  - b. Beta particle
  - c. Positron
  - d. Neutron
- 5.2 **DESCRIBE** the following ways that gamma radiation interacts with matter:
  - a. Compton scattering
  - b. Photoelectric effect
  - c. Pair production

**ATOMIC NATURE OF MATTER**

*All matter is composed of atoms. The atom is the smallest amount of matter that retains the properties of an element. Atoms themselves are composed of smaller particles, but these smaller particles no longer have the same properties as the overall element.*

- EO 1.1     **STATE** the characteristics of the following atomic particles, including mass, charge, and location within the atom:
- a.     Proton
  - b.     Neutron
  - c.     Electron
- EO 1.2     **DESCRIBE** the Bohr model of an atom.
- EO 1.3     **DEFINE** the following terms:
- a.     Nuclide
  - b.     Isotope
  - c.     Atomic number
  - d.     Mass number
- EO 1.4     Given the standard  ${}^A_ZX$  notation for a particular nuclide, **DETERMINE** the following:
- a.     Number of protons
  - b.     Number of neutrons
  - c.     Number of electrons
- EO 1.5     **DESCRIBE** the three forces that act on particles within the nucleus and affect the stability of the nucleus.

**Structure of Matter**

Early Greek philosophers speculated that the earth was made up of different combinations of basic substances, or elements. They considered these basic elements to be earth, air, water, and fire. Modern science shows that the early Greeks held the correct concept that matter consists of a combination of basic elements, but they incorrectly identified the elements.

In 1661 the English chemist Robert Boyle published the modern criterion for an element. He defined an element to be a basic substance that cannot be broken down into any simpler substance after it is isolated from a compound, but can be combined with other elements to form compounds. To date, 105 different elements have been

confirmed to exist, and researchers claim to have discovered three additional elements. Of the 105 confirmed elements, 90 exist in nature and 15 are man-made.

Another basic concept of matter that the Greeks debated was whether matter was continuous or discrete. That is, whether matter could be continuously divided and subdivided into ever smaller particles or whether eventually an indivisible particle would be encountered. Democritus in about 450 B.C. argued that substances were ultimately composed of small, indivisible particles that he labeled atoms. He further suggested that different substances were composed of different atoms or combinations of atoms, and that one substance could be converted into another by rearranging the atoms. It was impossible to conclusively prove or disprove this proposal for more than 2000 years.

The modern proof for the atomic nature of matter was first proposed by the English chemist John Dalton in 1803. Dalton stated that each chemical element possesses a particular kind of atom, and any quantity of the element is made up of identical atoms of this kind. What distinguishes one element from another element is the kind of atom of which it consists, and the basic physical difference between kinds of atoms is their weight.

### **Subatomic Particles**

For almost 100 years after Dalton established the atomic nature of atoms, it was considered impossible to divide the atom into even smaller parts. All of the results of chemical experiments during this time indicated that the atom was indivisible. Eventually, experimentation into electricity and radioactivity indicated that particles of matter smaller than the atom did indeed exist. In 1906, J. J. Thompson won the Nobel Prize in physics for establishing the existence of electrons. *Electrons* are negatively-charged particles that have  $1/1835$  the mass of the hydrogen atom. Soon after the discovery of electrons, protons were discovered. *Protons* are relatively large particles that have almost the same mass as a hydrogen atom and a positive charge equal in magnitude (but opposite in sign) to that of the electron. The third subatomic particle to be discovered, the neutron, was not found until 1932. The *neutron* has almost the same mass as the proton, but it is electrically neutral.

### **Bohr Model of the Atom**

The British physicist Ernest Rutherford postulated that the positive charge in an atom is concentrated in a small region called a nucleus at the center of the atom with electrons existing in orbits around it. Niels Bohr, coupling Rutherford's postulation with the quantum theory introduced by Max Planck, proposed that the atom consists of a dense nucleus of protons surrounded by electrons traveling in discrete orbits at fixed distances from the nucleus. An electron in one of these orbits or shells has a specific or discrete quantity of energy (quantum). When an electron moves from one allowed orbit to

another allowed orbit, the energy difference between the two states is emitted or absorbed in the form of a single quantum of radiant energy called a photon. Figure 1 is Bohr's model of the hydrogen atom showing an electron as having just dropped from the third shell to the first shell with the emission of a photon that has an energy =  $h\nu$ . ( $h$  = Planck's constant =  $6.63 \times 10^{-34}$  J-s and  $\nu$  = frequency of the photon.) Bohr's theory was the first to successfully account for the discrete energy levels of this radiation as measured in the laboratory. Although Bohr's atomic model is designed specifically to explain the hydrogen atom, his theories apply generally to the structure of all atoms. Additional information on electron shell theory can be found in the Chemistry Fundamentals Handbook.

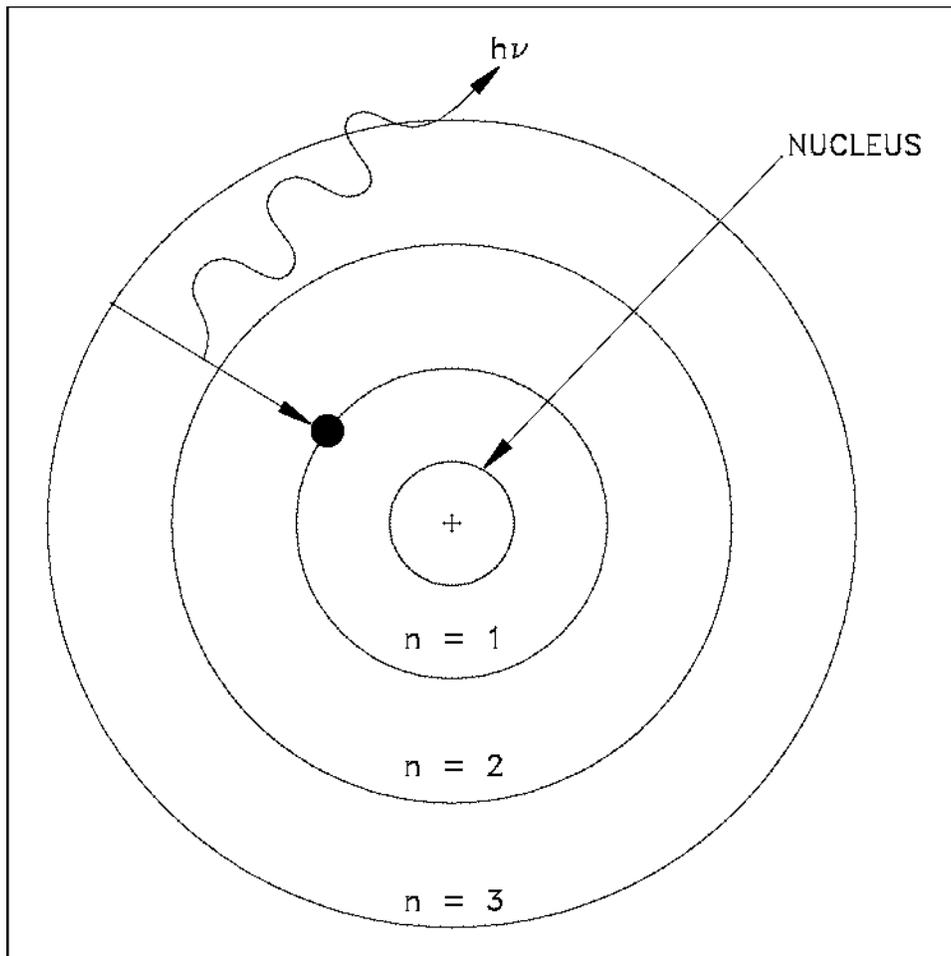


Figure 1 Bohr's Model of the Hydrogen Atom

Properties of the three subatomic particles are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Properties of Subatomic Particles			
Particle	Location	Charge	Mass
Neutron	Nucleus	none	1.008665 amu
Proton	Nucleus	+1	1.007277 amu
Electron	Shells around nucleus	-1	0.0005486 amu

### Measuring Units on the Atomic Scale

The size and mass of atoms are so small that the use of normal measuring units, while possible, is often inconvenient. Units of measure have been defined for mass and energy on the atomic scale to make measurements more convenient to express. The unit of measure for mass is the atomic mass unit (amu). One atomic mass unit is equal to  $1.66 \times 10^{-24}$  grams. The reason for this particular value for the atomic mass unit will be discussed in a later chapter. Note from Table 1 that the mass of a neutron and a proton are both about 1 amu. The unit for energy is the electron volt (eV). The electron volt is the amount of energy acquired by a single electron when it falls through a potential difference of one volt. One electron volt is equivalent to  $1.602 \times 10^{-19}$  joules or  $1.18 \times 10^{-19}$  foot-pounds.

### Nuclides

The total number of protons in the nucleus of an atom is called the *atomic number* of the atom and is given the symbol  $Z$ . The number of electrons in an electrically-neutral atom is the same as the number of protons in the nucleus. The number of neutrons in a nucleus is known as the neutron number and is given the symbol  $N$ . The *mass number* of the nucleus is the total number of nucleons, that is, protons and neutrons in the nucleus. The mass number is given the symbol  $A$  and can be found by the equation  $Z + N = A$ .

Each of the chemical elements has a unique atomic number because the atoms of different elements contain a different number of protons. The atomic number of an atom identifies the particular element.

Each type of atom that contains a unique combination of protons and neutrons is called a *nuclide*. Not all combinations of numbers of protons and neutrons are possible, but about 2500 specific nuclides with unique combinations of neutrons and protons have been identified. Each nuclide is denoted by the chemical symbol of the

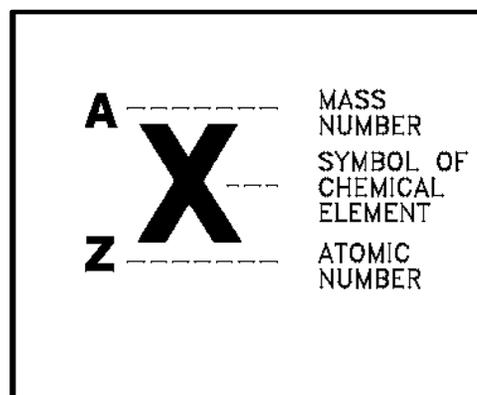
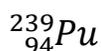
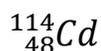


Figure 2 Nomenclature for Identifying Nuclides

element with the atomic number written as a subscript and the mass number written as a superscript, as shown in Figure 2. Because each element has a unique name, chemical symbol, and atomic number, only one of the three is necessary to identify the element. For this reason nuclides can also be identified by either the chemical name or the chemical symbol followed by the mass number (for example, U-235 or uranium-235). Another common format is to use the abbreviation of the chemical element with the mass number superscripted (for example,  $^{235}\text{U}$ ). In this handbook the format used in the text will usually be the element's name followed by the mass number. In equations and tables, the format in Figure 2 will usually be used.

Example:

State the name of the element and the number of protons, electrons, and neutrons in the nuclides listed below.



Solution:

The name of the element can be found from the Periodic Table (refer to Chemistry Fundamentals Handbook) or the Chart of the Nuclides (to be discussed later). The number of protons and electrons are equal to Z. The number of neutrons is equal to Z - A.

<u>Nuclide</u>	<u>Element</u>	<u>Protons</u>	<u>Electrons</u>	<u>Neutrons</u>
${}^1_1\text{H}$	hydrogen	1	1	0
${}^{10}_5\text{B}$	boron	5	5	5
${}^{14}_7\text{N}$	nitrogen	7	7	7
${}^{114}_{48}\text{Cd}$	cadmium	48	48	66
${}^{239}_{94}\text{Pu}$	plutonium	94	94	145

### Isotopes

*Isotopes* are nuclides that have the same atomic number and are therefore the same element, but differ in the number of neutrons. Most elements have a few stable isotopes

and several unstable, radioactive isotopes. For example, oxygen has three stable isotopes that can be found in nature (oxygen-16, oxygen-17, and oxygen-18) and eight radioactive isotopes. Another example is hydrogen, which has two stable isotopes (hydrogen-1 and hydrogen-2) and a single radioactive isotope (hydrogen-3).

The isotopes of hydrogen are unique in that they are each commonly referred to by a unique name instead of the common chemical element name. Hydrogen-1 is almost always referred to as hydrogen, but the term protium is infrequently used also. Hydrogen-2 is commonly called deuterium and symbolized D. Hydrogen-3 is commonly called tritium and symbolized T. This text will normally use the symbology  ${}^2_1\text{H}$  and  ${}^3_1\text{H}$  for deuterium and tritium, respectively.

### **Atomic and Nuclear Radii**

The size of an atom is difficult to define exactly due to the fact that the electron cloud, formed by the electrons moving in their various orbitals, does not have a distinct outer edge. A reasonable measure of atomic size is given by the average distance of the outermost electron from the nucleus. Except for a few of the lightest atoms, the average atomic radii are approximately the same for all atoms, about  $2 \times 10^{-8}$  cm.

Like the atom the nucleus does not have a sharp outer boundary. Experiments have shown that the nucleus is shaped like a sphere with a radius that depends on the atomic mass number of the atom. The relationship between the atomic mass number and the radius of the nucleus is shown in the following equation.

$$r = (1.25 \times 10^{-13} \text{ cm}) A^{1/3}$$

where:

$r$  = radius of the nucleus (cm)

$A$  = atomic mass number (dimensionless)

The values of the nuclear radii for some light, intermediate, and heavy nuclides are shown in Table 2.

<b>TABLE 2</b> <b>Calculated Values for Nuclear Radii</b>	
Nuclide	Radius of Nucleus
${}^1_1H$	$1.25 \times 10^{-13}$ cm
${}^{10}_5B$	$2.69 \times 10^{-13}$ cm
${}^{56}_{26}Fe$	$4.78 \times 10^{-13}$ cm
${}^{178}_{72}Hf$	$7.01 \times 10^{-13}$ cm
${}^{238}_{92}U$	$7.74 \times 10^{-13}$ cm
${}^{252}_{98}Cf$	$7.89 \times 10^{-13}$ cm

From the table, it is clear that the radius of a typical atom (e.g.  $2 \times 10^{-8}$  cm) is more than 25,000 times larger than the radius of the largest nucleus.

### **Nuclear Forces**

In the Bohr model of the atom, the nucleus consists of positively-charged protons and electrically-neutral neutrons. Since both protons and neutrons exist in the nucleus, they are both referred to as nucleons. One problem that the Bohr model of the atom presented was accounting for an attractive force to overcome the repulsive force between protons.

Two forces present in the nucleus are (1) electrostatic forces between charged particles and (2) gravitational forces between any two objects that have mass. It is possible to calculate the magnitude of the gravitational force and electrostatic force based upon principles from classical physics.

Newton stated that the *gravitational force* between two bodies is directly proportional to the masses of the two bodies and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between the bodies. This relationship is shown in the equation below.

$$F_g = \frac{G m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

where:

$F_g$  = gravitational force (newtons)

$m_1$  = mass of first body (kilograms)

- $m_2$  = mass of second body (kilograms)  
 $G$  = gravitational constant ( $6.67 \times 10^{-11} \text{ N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{kg}^2$ )  
 $r$  = distance between particles (meters)

The equation illustrates that the larger the masses of the objects or the smaller the distance between the objects, the greater the gravitational force. So even though the masses of nucleons are very small, the fact that the distance between nucleons is extremely short may make the gravitational force significant. It is necessary to calculate the value for the gravitational force and compare it to the value for other forces to determine the significance of the gravitational force in the nucleus. The gravitational force between two protons that are separated by a distance of  $10^{-20}$  meters is about  $10^{-24}$  newtons.

Coulomb's Law can be used to calculate the force between two protons. The *electrostatic force* is directly proportional to the electrical charges of the two particles and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between the particles. Coulomb's Law is stated as the following equation.

$$F_e = \frac{K Q_1 Q_2}{r^2}$$

where:

- $F_e$  = electrostatic force (newtons)  
 $K$  = electrostatic constant ( $9.0 \times 10^9 \text{ N}\cdot\text{m}^2/\text{C}^2$ )  
 $Q_1$  = charge of first particle (coulombs)  
 $Q_2$  = charge of second particle (coulombs)  
 $r$  = distance between particles (meters)

Using this equation, the electrostatic force between two protons that are separated by a distance of  $10^{-20}$  meters is about  $10^{12}$  newtons. Comparing this result with the calculation of the gravitational force ( $10^{-24}$  newtons) shows that the gravitational force is so small that it can be neglected.

If only the electrostatic and gravitational forces existed in the nucleus, then it would be impossible to have stable nuclei composed of protons and neutrons. The gravitational forces are much too small to hold the nucleons together compared to the electrostatic forces repelling the protons. Since stable atoms of neutrons and protons do exist, there must be another attractive force acting within the nucleus. This force is called the nuclear force.

The *nuclear force* is a strong attractive force that is independent of charge. It acts equally only between pairs of neutrons, pairs of protons, or a neutron and a proton. The

nuclear force has a very short range; it acts only over distances approximately equal to the diameter of the nucleus ( $10^{-13}$  cm). The attractive nuclear force between all nucleons drops off with distance much faster than the repulsive electrostatic force between protons.

<b>TABLE 3 Forces Acting in the Nucleus</b>		
Force	Interaction	Range
Gravitational	Very weak attractive force between all nucleons	Relatively long
Electrostatic	Strong repulsive force between like charged particles (protons)	Relatively long
Nuclear Force	Strong attractive force between all nucleons	Extremely short

In stable atoms, the attractive and repulsive forces in the nucleus balance. If the forces do not balance, the atom cannot be stable, and the nucleus will emit radiation in an attempt to achieve a more stable configuration.

### **Summary**

The important information in this chapter is summarized on the following page.

### Atomic Nature of Matter Summary

- Atoms consist of three basic subatomic particles. These particles are the proton, the neutron, and the electron.
- Protons are particles that have a positive charge, have about the same mass as a hydrogen atom, and exist in the nucleus of an atom.
- Neutrons are particles that have no electrical charge, have about the same mass as a hydrogen atom, and exist in the nucleus of an atom.
- Electrons are particles that have a negative charge, have a mass about eighteen hundred times smaller than the mass of a hydrogen atom, and exist in orbital shells around the nucleus of an atom.
- The Bohr model of the atom consists of a dense nucleus of protons and neutrons (nucleons) surrounded by electrons traveling in discrete orbits at fixed distances from the nucleus.
- Nuclides are atoms that contain a particular number of protons and neutrons.
- Isotopes are nuclides that have the same atomic number and are therefore the same element, but differ in the number of neutrons.
- The atomic number of an atom is the number of protons in the nucleus.
- The mass number of an atom is the total number of nucleons (protons and neutrons) in the nucleus.
- The notation  ${}^A_ZX$  is used to identify a specific nuclide. "Z" represents the atomic number, which is equal to the number of protons. "A" represents the mass number, which is equal to the number of nucleons. "X" represents the chemical symbol of the element.
 

Number of protons	=	Z
Number of electrons	=	Z
Number of neutrons	=	A - Z
- The stability of a nucleus is determined by the different forces interacting within it. The electrostatic force is a relatively long-range, strong, repulsive force that acts between the positively charged protons. The nuclear force is a relatively short-range attractive force between all nucleons. The gravitational force the long range, relatively weak attraction between masses, is negligible compared to the other forces.

## **CHART OF THE NUCLIDES**

*The Chart of the Nuclides, like the Periodic Table, is a convenient format for presenting a large amount of scientific information in an organized manner.*

EO 1.6      **DEFINE** the following terms:

- a.      Enriched uranium
- b.      Depleted uranium

### **Chart of the Nuclides**

A tabulated chart called the *Chart of the Nuclides* lists the stable and unstable nuclides in addition to pertinent information about each one. Figure 3 shows a small portion of a typical chart. This chart plots a box for each individual nuclide, with the number of protons ( $Z$ ) on the vertical axis and the number of neutrons ( $N = A - Z$ ) on the horizontal axis.

The completely gray squares indicate stable isotopes. Those in white squares are *artificially radioactive*, meaning that they are produced by artificial techniques and do not occur naturally. By consulting a complete chart, other types of isotopes can be found, such as naturally occurring radioactive types (but none are found in the region of the chart that is illustrated in Figure 3).

Located in the box on the far left of each horizontal row is general information about the element. The box contains the chemical symbol of the element in addition to the average atomic weight of the naturally occurring substance and the average thermal neutron absorption cross section, which will be discussed in a later module. The known isotopes (elements with the same atomic number  $Z$  but different mass number  $A$ ) of each element are listed to the right.



### Information for Unstable Nuclides

For unstable isotopes the additional information includes the half life, the mode of decay (for example,  $\beta^-$ ,  $\alpha$ ), the total disintegration energy in MeV (million electron volts), and the mass in amu when available. A typical block for an unstable nuclide from the Chart of the Nuclides is shown in Figure 5.

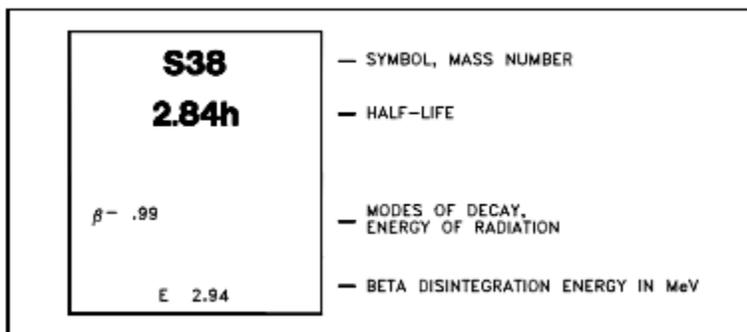


Figure 5: Unstable Nuclides

### Neutron - Proton Ratios

Figure 6 shows the distribution of the stable nuclides plotted on the same axes as the Chart of the Nuclides. As the mass numbers become higher, the ratio of neutrons to protons in the nucleus becomes larger. For helium-4 (2 protons and 2 neutrons) and oxygen-16 (8 protons and 8 neutrons) this ratio is unity. For indium-115 (49 protons and 66 neutrons) the ratio of neutrons to protons has increased to 1.35, and for uranium-238 (92 protons and 146 neutrons) the neutron-to-proton ratio is 1.59.

If a heavy nucleus were to split into two fragments, each fragment would form a nucleus that would have approximately the same neutron-to-proton ratio as the heavy nucleus. This high neutron-to-proton ratio places the fragments below and to the right of the stability curve displayed by Figure 6. The instability caused by this excess of neutrons is generally rectified by successive beta emissions, each of which converts a neutron to a proton and moves the nucleus toward a more stable neutron-to-proton ratio.

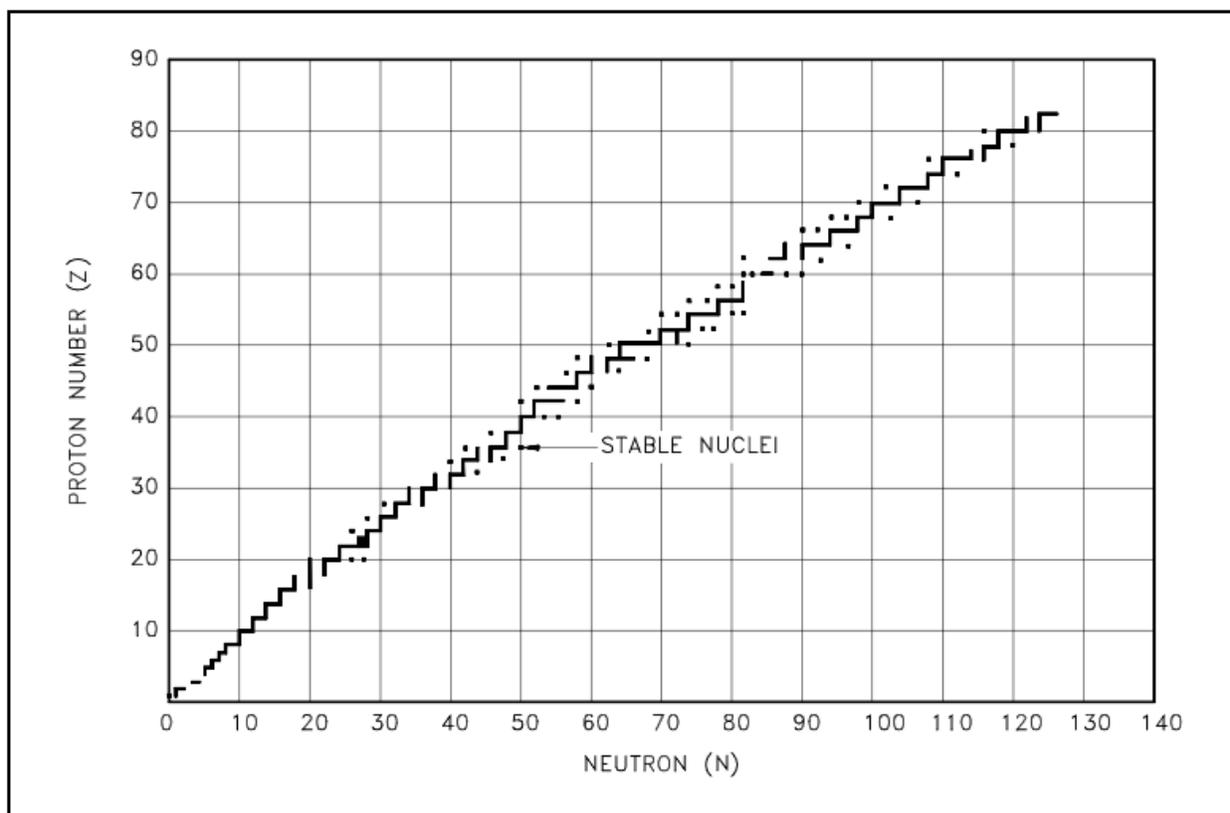


Figure 6: Neutron - Proton Plot of the Stable Nuclides

### **Natural Abundance of Isotopes**

The relative abundance of an isotope in nature compared to other isotopes of the same element is relatively constant. The Chart of the Nuclides presents the relative abundance of the naturally occurring isotopes of an element in units of atom percent. Atom percent is the percentage of the atoms of an element that are of a particular isotope. Atom percent is abbreviated as *a/o*. For example, if a cup of water contains  $8.23 \times 10^{24}$  atoms of oxygen, and the isotopic abundance of oxygen-18 is 0.20%, then there are  $1.65 \times 10^{22}$  atoms of oxygen-18 in the cup.

The atomic weight for an element is defined as the average atomic weight of the isotopes of the element. The atomic weight for an element can be calculated by summing the products of the isotopic abundance of the isotope with the atomic mass of the isotope.

Example:

Calculate the atomic weight for the element lithium. Lithium-6 has an atom percent abundance of 7.5% and an atomic mass of 6.015122 amu. Lithium-7 has an atomic abundance of 92.5% and an atomic mass of 7.016003 amu.

Solution:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Atomic Mass Lithium} &= (0.075) (6.015122 \text{ amu}) + (0.925) (7.016003 \text{ amu}) \\ &= 6.9409 \text{ amu}\end{aligned}$$

The other common measurement of isotopic abundance is weight percent (w/o). Weight percent is the percent weight of an element that is a particular isotope. For example, if a sample of material contained 100 kg of uranium that was 28 w/o uranium-235, then 28 kg of uranium-235 was present in the sample.

### **Enriched and Depleted Uranium**

Natural uranium mined from the earth contains the isotopes uranium-238, uranium-235 and uranium-234. The majority (99.2745%) of all the atoms in natural uranium are uranium-238. Most of the remaining atoms (0.72%) are uranium-235, and a slight trace (0.0055%) are uranium-234. Although all isotopes of uranium have similar chemical properties, each of the isotopes has significantly different nuclear properties. For reasons that will be discussed in later modules, the isotope uranium-235 is usually the desired material for use in reactors.

A vast amount of equipment and energy are expended in processes that separate the isotopes of uranium (and other elements). The details of these processes are beyond the scope of this module. These processes are called enrichment processes because they selectively increase the proportion of a particular isotope. The enrichment process typically starts with feed material that has the proportion of isotopes that occur naturally. The process results in two types of the same element; one with a higher than natural proportion of one isotope and one with a lower than natural proportion.

In the case of uranium, the natural uranium ore is 0.72 a/o uranium-235. The desired outcome of the enrichment process is to produce enriched uranium. *Enriched uranium* is defined as uranium in which the isotope uranium-235 has a concentration greater than its natural value. The enrichment process will also result in the byproduct of depleted uranium. *Depleted uranium* is defined as uranium in which the isotope uranium-235 has a concentration less than its natural value. Although depleted uranium is referred to as a by-product of the enrichment process, it does have uses in the nuclear field and in commercial and defense industries.

### **Summary**

The important information in this chapter is summarized below.

**Chart of the Nuclides Summary**

- Enriched uranium is uranium in which the isotope uranium-235 has a concentration greater than its natural value of 0.7%.
- Depleted uranium is uranium in which the isotope uranium-235 has a concentration less than its natural value of 0.7%.

## MASS DEFECT AND BINDING ENERGY

*The separate laws of Conservation of Mass and Conservation of Energy are not applied strictly on the nuclear level. It is possible to convert between mass and energy. Instead of two separate conservation laws, a single conservation law states that the sum of mass and energy is conserved. Mass does not magically appear and disappear at random. A decrease in mass will be accompanied by a corresponding increase in energy and vice versa.*

EO 1.7      **DEFINE** the following terms:

- a.      Mass defect
- b.      Binding energy

EO 1.8      Given the atomic mass for a nuclide and the atomic mass of neutrons, protons, and electrons, **CALCULATE** the mass defect and binding energy of the nuclide.

### Mass Defect

Careful measurements have shown that the mass of a particular atom is always slightly less than the sum of the masses of the individual neutrons, protons, and electrons of which the atom consists. The difference between the mass of the atom and the sum of the masses of its parts is called the *mass defect* ( $\Delta m$ ). The mass defect can be calculated using Equation (1-1). In calculating the mass defect it is important to use the full accuracy of mass measurements because the difference in mass is small compared to the mass of the atom. Rounding off the masses of atoms and particles to three or four significant digits prior to the calculation will result in a calculated mass defect of zero.

$$\Delta m = [ Z(m_p + m_e) + (A-Z)m_n ] - m_{\text{atom}} \quad (1-1)$$

where:

$\Delta m$	=	mass defect (amu)
$m_p$	=	mass of a proton (1.007277 amu)
$m_n$	=	mass of a neutron (1.008665 amu)
$m_e$	=	mass of an electron (0.000548597 amu)
$m_{\text{atom}}$	=	mass of nuclide ${}^A_ZX$ (amu)
$Z$	=	atomic number (number of protons)
$A$	=	mass number (number of nucleons)

Example:

Calculate the mass defect for lithium-7. The mass of lithium-7 is 7.016003 amu.

Solution:

$$\Delta m = [Z (m_p + m_e) + (A - Z) m_n] - m_{\text{atom}}$$

$$\Delta m = [3 (1.007826 \text{ amu}) + (7 - 3) 1.008665 \text{ amu}] - 7.016003 \text{ amu}$$

$$\Delta m = 0.0421335 \text{ amu}$$

### **Binding Energy**

The loss in mass, or mass defect, is due to the conversion of mass to binding energy when the nucleus is formed. *Binding energy* is defined as the amount of energy that must be supplied to a nucleus to completely separate its nuclear particles (nucleons). It can also be understood as the amount of energy that would be released if the nucleus was formed from the separate particles. Binding energy is the energy equivalent of the mass defect. Since the mass defect was converted to binding energy (BE) when the nucleus was formed, it is possible to calculate the binding energy using a conversion factor derived by the mass-energy relationship from Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

Einstein's famous equation relating mass and energy is  $E = mc^2$  where  $c$  is the velocity of light ( $c = 2.998 \times 10^8 \text{ m/s}$ ). The energy equivalent of 1 amu can be determined by inserting this quantity of mass into Einstein's equation and applying conversion factors.

$$\begin{aligned} E &= m c^2 \\ &= 1 \text{ amu} \left[ \frac{1.6606 \times 10^{-27}}{1 \text{ amu}} \right] [2.998 \times 10^8 \text{ m/s}]^2 \left[ \frac{1 \text{ N}}{1 \frac{\text{kg-m}}{\text{s}^2}} \right] \left[ \frac{1 \text{ J}}{1 \text{ N-m}} \right] \\ &= 1.4924 \times 10^{-10} \text{ J} \left[ \frac{1 \text{ MeV}}{1.6022 \times 10^{-13} \text{ J}} \right] \\ &= 931.5 \text{ MeV} \end{aligned}$$

Conversion Factors:

$$\begin{aligned} 1 \text{ amu} &= 1.6606 \times 10^{-27} \text{ kg} \\ 1 \text{ newton} &= 1 \text{ kg-m/s}^2 \\ 1 \text{ joule} &= 1 \text{ newton-meter [N-m]} \\ 1 \text{ MeV} &= 1.6022 \times 10^{-13} \text{ joules [J]} \end{aligned}$$

Since 1 amu is equivalent to 931.5 MeV of energy, the binding energy can be calculated using Equation (1-2).

$$\text{B.E.} = \Delta m \left[ \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{1 \text{ amu}} \right] \quad (1-2)$$

Example:

Calculate the mass defect and binding energy for uranium-235. One uranium-235 atom has a mass of 235.043924 amu.

Solution:

Step 1: Calculate the mass defect using Equation (1-1).

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta m &= [Z (m_p + m_e) + (A - Z) m_n] - m_{\text{atom}} \\ \Delta m &= [92 (1.007826 \text{ amu}) + (235 - 92) 1.008665 \text{ amu}] - \\ &\quad 235.043924 \text{ amu} \\ \Delta m &= 1.91517 \text{ amu}\end{aligned}$$

Step 2: Use the mass defect and Equation (1-2) to calculate the binding energy.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{B.E.} &= \Delta m \left[ \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{1 \text{ amu}} \right] \\ &= 1.91517 \text{ amu} \left[ \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{1 \text{ amu}} \right] \\ &= 1784 \text{ MeV}\end{aligned}$$

### Energy Levels of Atoms

The electrons that circle the nucleus move in fairly well-defined orbits. Some of these electrons are more tightly bound in the atom than others. For example, only 7.38 eV is required to remove the outermost electron from a lead atom, while 88,000 eV is required to remove the innermost electron. The process of removing an electron from an atom is called ionization, and the energy required to remove the electron is called the ionization energy.

In a neutral atom (number of electrons = Z) it is possible for the electrons to be in a variety of different orbits, each with a different energy level. The state of lowest energy is the one in which the atom is normally found and is called the ground state. When the atom possesses more energy than its ground state energy, it is said to be in an excited state.

An atom cannot stay in the excited state for an indefinite period of time. An excited atom will eventually transition to either a lower-energy excited state, or directly to its ground state, by emitting a discrete bundle of electromagnetic energy called an x-ray. The energy of the x-ray will be equal to the difference between the energy levels of the atom and will typically range from several eV to 100,000 eV in magnitude.

**Energy Levels of the Nucleus**

The nucleons in the nucleus of an atom, like the electrons that circle the nucleus, exist in shells that correspond to energy states. The energy shells of the nucleus are less defined and less understood than those of the electrons. There is a state of lowest energy (the ground state) and discrete possible excited states for a nucleus. Where the discrete energy states for the electrons of an atom are measured in eV or keV, the energy levels of the nucleus are considerably greater and typically measured in MeV.

A nucleus that is in the excited state will not remain at that energy level for an indefinite period. Like the electrons in an excited atom, the nucleons in an excited nucleus will transition towards their lowest energy configuration and in doing so emit a discrete bundle of electromagnetic radiation called a gamma ray ( $\gamma$ -ray). The only differences between x-rays and  $\gamma$ -rays are their energy levels and whether they are emitted from the electron shell or from the nucleus.

The ground state and the excited states of a nucleus can be depicted in a nuclear energy-level diagram. The nuclear energy-level diagram consists of a stack of horizontal bars, one bar for each of the excited states of the nucleus. The vertical distance between the bar representing an excited state and the bar representing the ground state is proportional to the energy level of the excited state with respect to the ground state. This difference in energy between the ground state and the excited state is called the excitation energy of the excited state. The ground state of a nuclide has zero excitation energy. The bars for the excited states are labeled with their respective energy levels. Figure 7 is the energy level diagram for nickel-60.

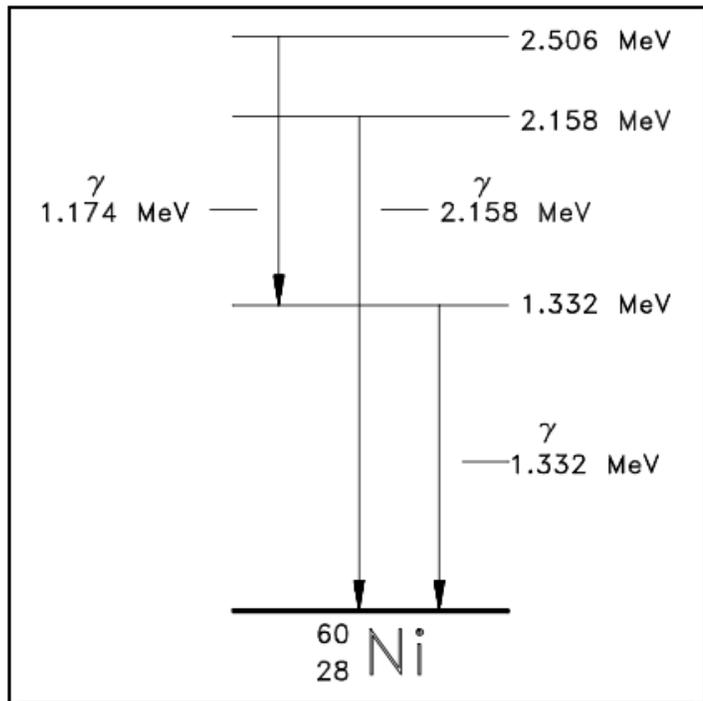


Figure 7 Energy Level Diagram - Nickel-60

**Summary**

The important information in this chapter is summarized below.

**Mass Defect and Binding Energy Summary**

- Mass defect is the difference between the mass of the atom and the sum of the masses of its constituent parts.
- Binding energy is the amount of energy that must be supplied to a nucleus to completely separate its nuclear particles. Binding energy is the energy equivalent of the mass defect.
- Mass defect can be calculated by using the equation below.

$$\Delta m = [Z (m_p + m_e) + (A - Z) m_n] - m_{\text{atom}}$$

- Binding energy can be calculated by multiplying the mass defect by the factor of 931.5 MeV per amu.

## MODES OF RADIOACTIVE DECAY

*Most atoms found in nature are stable and do not emit particles or energy that change form over time. Some atoms, however, do not have stable nuclei. These atoms emit radiation in order to achieve a more stable configuration.*

- EO 2.1      **DESCRIBE** the following processes:
- |                     |                         |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Alpha decay      | d. Electron capture     |
| b. Beta-minus decay | e. Internal conversions |
| c. Beta-plus decay  | f. Isomeric transitions |
- EO 2.2      Given a Chart of the Nuclides, **WRITE** the radioactive decay chain for a nuclide.
- EO 2.3      **EXPLAIN** why one or more gamma rays typically accompany particle emission.
- EO 2.4      Given the stability curve on the Chart of the Nuclides, **DETERMINE** the type of radioactive decay that the nuclides in each region of the chart will typically undergo.

### Stability of Nuclei

As mass numbers become larger, the ratio of neutrons to protons in the nucleus becomes larger for the stable nuclei. Non-stable nuclei may have an excess or deficiency of neutrons and undergo a transformation process known as beta ( $\beta$ ) decay. Non-stable nuclei can also undergo a variety of other processes such as alpha ( $\alpha$ ) or neutron ( $n$ ) decay. As a result of these decay processes, the final nucleus is in a more stable or more tightly bound configuration.

### Natural Radioactivity

In 1896, the French physicist Becquerel discovered that crystals of a uranium salt emitted rays that were similar to x-rays in that they were highly penetrating, could affect a photographic plate, and induced electrical conductivity in gases. Becquerel's discovery was followed in 1898 by the identification of two other radioactive elements, polonium and radium, by Pierre and Marie Curie.

Heavy elements, such as uranium or thorium, and their unstable decay chain elements emit radiation in their naturally occurring state. Uranium and thorium, present since their

creation at the beginning of geological time, have an extremely slow rate of decay. All naturally occurring nuclides with atomic numbers greater than 82 are radioactive.

### **Nuclear Decay**

Whenever a nucleus can attain a more stable (i.e., more tightly bound) configuration by emitting radiation, a spontaneous disintegration process known as radioactive decay or nuclear decay may occur. In practice, this "radiation" may be electromagnetic radiation, particles, or both.

Detailed studies of radioactive decay and nuclear reaction processes have led to the formulation of useful conservation principles. The four principles of most interest in this module are discussed below.

*Conservation of electric charge* implies that charges are neither created nor destroyed. Single positive and negative charges may, however, neutralize each other. It is also possible for a neutral particle to produce one charge of each sign.

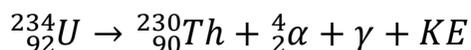
*Conservation of mass number* does not allow a net change in the number of nucleons. However, the conversion of a proton to a neutron and vice versa is allowed.

*Conservation of mass and energy* implies that the total of the kinetic energy and the energy equivalent of the mass in a system must be conserved in all decays and reactions. Mass can be converted to energy and energy can be converted to mass, but the sum of mass and energy must be constant.

*Conservation of momentum* is responsible for the distribution of the available kinetic energy among product nuclei, particles, and/or radiation. The total amount is the same before and after the reaction even though it may be distributed differently among entirely different nuclides and/or particles.

### **Alpha Decay ( $\alpha$ )**

*Alpha decay* is the emission of alpha particles (helium nuclei) which may be represented as either  ${}^4_2\text{He}$  or  $\frac{4}{2}\alpha$ . When an unstable nucleus ejects an alpha particle, the atomic number is reduced by 2 and the mass number decreased by 4. An example is uranium-234 which decays by the ejection of an alpha particle accompanied by the emission of a 0.068 MeV gamma.



The combined kinetic energy of the daughter nucleus (Thorium-230) and the  $\alpha$  particle is designated as KE. The sum of the KE and the gamma energy is equal to the difference in mass between the original nucleus (Uranium-234) and the final particles (equivalent to the binding energy released, since  $\Delta m = BE$ ). The alpha particle will

carry off as much as 98% of the kinetic energy and, in most cases, can be considered to carry off all the kinetic energy.

### **Beta Decay ( $\beta$ )**

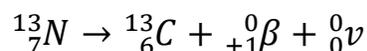
*Beta decay* is the emission of electrons of nuclear rather than orbital origin. These particles are electrons that have been expelled by excited nuclei and may have a charge of either sign.

If both energy and momentum are to be conserved, a third type of particle, the neutrino,  $\nu$ , must be involved. The neutrino is associated with positive electron emission, and its antiparticle, the antineutrino,  $\bar{\nu}$ , is emitted with a negative electron. These uncharged particles have only the weakest interaction with matter, no mass, and travel at the speed of light. For all practical purposes, they pass through all materials with so few interactions that the energy they possess cannot be recovered. The neutrinos and antineutrinos are included here only because they carry a portion of the kinetic energy that would otherwise belong to the beta particle, and therefore, must be considered for energy and momentum to be conserved. They are normally ignored since they are not significant in the context of nuclear reactor applications.

Negative electron emission, represented as  ${}_{-1}^0e$ ,  ${}_{-1}^0\beta$ , or simply as  $e^-$  or  $\beta^-$ , effectively converts a neutron to a proton, thus increasing the atomic number by one and leaving the mass number unchanged. This is a common mode of decay for nuclei with an excess of neutrons, such as fission fragments below and to the right of the neutron-proton stability curve (refer to Figure 6). An example of a typical beta minus-decay reaction is shown below.



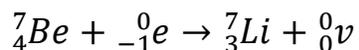
Positively charged electrons (beta-plus) are known as positrons. Except for sign, they are nearly identical to their negatively charged cousins. When a positron, represented as  ${}_{+1}^0e$  or  ${}_{+1}^0\beta$ , or simply as  $e^+$  or  $\beta^+$ , is ejected from the nucleus, the atomic number is decreased by one and the mass number remains unchanged. A proton has been converted to a neutron. An example of a typical positron (beta-plus) decay is shown below.



### **Electron Capture (EC, K-capture)**

Nuclei having an excess of protons may capture an electron from one of the inner orbits which immediately combines with a proton in the nucleus to form a neutron. This process is called *electron capture* (EC). The electron is normally captured from

the innermost orbit (the K-shell), and, consequently, this process is sometimes called K-capture. The following example depicts electron capture.



A neutrino is formed at the same time that the neutron is formed, and energy carried off by it serves to conserve momentum. Any energy that is available due to the atomic mass of the product being appreciably less than that of the parent will appear as gamma radiation. Also, there will always be characteristic x-rays given off when an electron from one of the higher energy shells moves in to fill the vacancy in the K-shell. Electron capture is shown graphically in Figure 8.

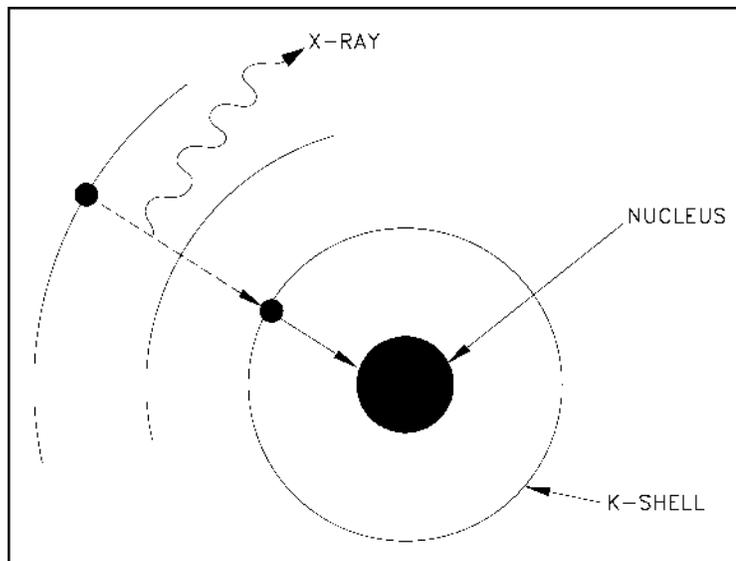


Figure 8: Orbital Electron Capture

Electron capture and positron emission result in the production of the same daughter product, and they exist as competing processes. For positron emission to occur, however, the mass of the daughter product must be less than the mass of the parent by an amount equal to at least twice the mass of an electron. This mass difference between the parent and daughter is necessary to account for two items present in the parent but not in the daughter. One item is the positron ejected from the nucleus of the parent. The other item is that the daughter product has one less orbital electron than the parent. If this requirement is not met, then orbital electron capture takes place exclusively.

### **Gamma Emission ( $\gamma$ )**

Gamma radiation is a high-energy electromagnetic radiation that originates in the nucleus. It is emitted in the form of photons, discrete bundles of energy that have both wave and particle properties. Often a daughter nuclide is left in an excited state after a radioactive parent nucleus undergoes a transformation by alpha decay, beta decay, or electron capture. The nucleus will drop to the ground state by the emission of gamma radiation.

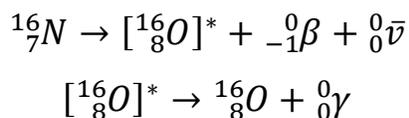
### Internal Conversion

The usual method for an excited nucleus to go from the excited state to the ground state is by emission of gamma radiation. However, in some cases the gamma ray (photon) emerges from the nucleus only to interact with one of the innermost orbital electrons and, as a result, the energy of the photon is transferred to the electron. The gamma ray is then said to have undergone *internal conversion*. The conversion electron is ejected from the atom with kinetic energy equal to the gamma energy minus the binding energy of the orbital electron. An orbital electron then drops to a lower energy state to fill the vacancy, and this is accompanied by the emission of characteristic x-rays.

### Isomers and Isomeric Transition

Isomeric transition commonly occurs immediately after particle emission; however, the nucleus may remain in an excited state for a measurable period of time before dropping to the ground state at its own characteristic rate. A nucleus that remains in such an excited state is known as a nuclear *isomer* because it differs in energy and behavior from other nuclei with the same atomic number and mass number. The decay of an excited nuclear isomer to a lower energy level is called an *isomeric transition*. It is also possible for the excited isomer to decay by some alternate means, for example, by beta emission.

An example of gamma emission accompanying particle emission is illustrated by the decay of nitrogen-16 below.



### Decay Chains

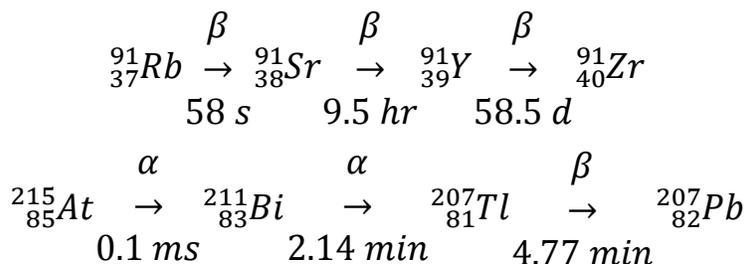
When an unstable nucleus decays, the resulting daughter nucleus is not necessarily stable. The nucleus resulting from the decay of a parent is often itself unstable, and will undergo an additional decay. This is especially common among the larger nuclides.

It is possible to trace the steps of an unstable atom as it goes through multiple decays trying to achieve stability. The list of the original unstable nuclide, the nuclides that are involved as intermediate steps in the decay, and the final stable nuclide is known as the *decay chain*. One common method for stating the decay chain is to state each of the nuclides involved in the standard  ${}^A_ZX$  format. Arrows are used between nuclides to indicate where decays occur, with the type of decay indicated above the arrow and the half-life below the arrow. The half-life for decay will be discussed in the next chapter.

Example:

Write the decay chains for rubidium-91 and actinium-215. Continue the chains until a stable nuclide or a nuclide with a half-life greater than  $1 \times 10^6$  years is reached.

Solution:



### Predicting Type of Decay

Radioactive nuclides tend to decay in a way that results in a daughter nuclide that lies closer to the line of stability. Due to this, it is possible to predict the type of decay that a nuclide will undergo based on its location relative to the line of stability on the Chart of the Nuclides.

Figure 9 illustrates the type of decay nuclides in different regions of the chart will typically undergo. Nuclides that are below and to the right of the line of stability will usually undergo  $\beta^-$  decay. Nuclides that are above and to the left of the line of stability will usually undergo either  $\beta^+$  decay or electron capture. Most nuclides that will undergo a decay are found in the upper right hand region of the chart. These are general rules that have many exceptions, especially in the region of the heavy nuclides.

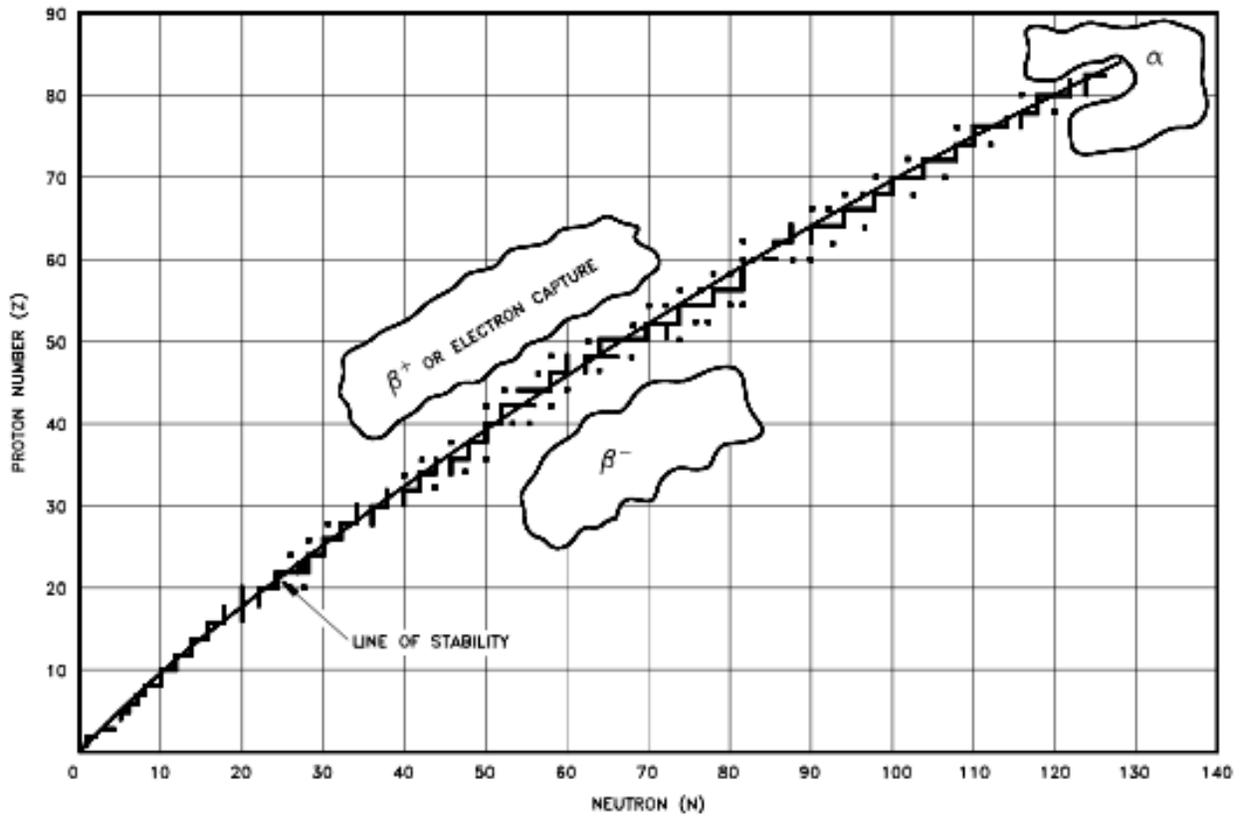


Figure 9: Types of Radioactive Decay Relative to the Line of Stability

## Summary

The important information in this chapter is summarized below.

### **Modes of Radioactive Decay Summary**

- Alpha decay is the emission of an alpha particle (2 protons and 2 neutrons) from an unstable nucleus. The daughter nuclide has an atomic number 2 less than the parent nuclide and a mass number 4 less than the parent nuclide. The daughter nucleus commonly releases its excitation energy by gamma emission.
- Beta-minus decay effectively converts a neutron to a proton and an electron, which is immediately ejected from the nucleus. The daughter nuclide has its atomic number increased by 1 and the same mass number compared to the parent.
- Beta-plus decay effectively converts a proton to a neutron and a positron, which is immediately ejected from the nucleus. The daughter nuclide has its atomic number decreased by 1 and the same mass number compared to the parent.
- In electron capture, the nucleus absorbs an electron from the innermost orbit. This electron combines with a proton to form a neutron.
- Internal conversion occurs when a gamma ray, emitted by the nucleus as it goes from the excited state to the ground state, interacts with one of the innermost electrons of the same atom. The electron is ejected from the atom.
- An isomeric transition is the decay of an excited nucleus to a lower-energy level by the emission of a gamma ray.
- Decay chains can be found by tracing the steps an unstable atom goes through as it tries to achieve stability.
- Many modes of radioactive decay result in a daughter nuclide that has an energy level above the ground state. This excitation energy is usually released immediately in the form of a gamma ray.
- The type of decay that a nuclide will typically undergo can be determined by its relationship to the line of stability on the Chart of the Nuclides. Nuclides that lie below and to the right of the line of stability will typically beta minus decay. Nuclides above and to the left of the line will typically either beta plus decay or electron capture. Most alpha emitters are found in the upper, right-hand corner of the chart.

**RADIOACTIVITY**

*The rate at which a sample of radioactive material decays is not constant. As individual atoms of the material decay, there are fewer of those types of atoms remaining. Since the rate of decay is directly proportional to the number of atoms, the rate of decay will decrease as the number of atoms decreases.*

- EO 2.5     **DEFINE** the following terms:
- |                      |                                   |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| a.     Radioactivity | d.     Radioactive decay constant |
| b.     Curie         | e.     Radioactive half-life      |
| c.     Becquerel     |                                   |
- EO 2.6     Given the number of atoms and either the half-life or decay constant of a nuclide, **CALCULATE** the activity.
- EO 2.7     Given the initial activity and the decay constant of a nuclide, **CALCULATE** the activity at any later time.
- EO 2.8     **CONVERT** between the half-life and decay constant for a nuclide.
- EO 2.9     Given the Chart of the Nuclides and the original activity, **PLOT** the radioactive decay curve for a nuclide on either linear or semi-log coordinates.
- EO 2.10    **DEFINE** the following terms:
- |  |
|--|
| a.     Radioactive equilibrium           |
| b.     Transient radioactive equilibrium |

**Radioactive Decay Rates**

*Radioactivity* is the property of certain nuclides of spontaneously emitting particles or gamma radiation. The decay of radioactive nuclides occurs in a random manner, and the precise time at which a single nucleus will decay cannot be determined. However, the average behavior of a very large sample can be predicted accurately by using statistical methods. These studies have revealed that there is a certain probability that in a given time interval a certain fraction of the nuclei within a sample of a particular nuclide will decay. This probability per unit time that an atom of a nuclide will decay is known as the *radioactive decay constant*,  $\lambda$ . The units for the decay constant are inverse time such as 1/second, 1/minute, 1/hour, or 1/year. These decay constant units can also be expressed as  $\text{second}^{-1}$ ,  $\text{minute}^{-1}$ ,  $\text{hour}^{-1}$ , and  $\text{year}^{-1}$ .

The *activity* ( $A$ ) of a sample is the rate of decay of that sample. This rate of decay is usually measured in the number of disintegrations that occur per second. For a

sample containing millions of atoms, the activity is the product of the decay constant and the number of atoms present in the sample.

The relationship between the activity, number of atoms, and decay constant is shown in Equation (1-3).

$$A = \lambda N \quad (1-3)$$

where:

A = Activity of the nuclide (disintegrations/second)

$\lambda$  = decay constant of the nuclide (second<sup>-1</sup>)

N = Number of atoms of the nuclide in the sample

Since  $\lambda$  is a constant, the activity and the number of atoms are always proportional.

### **Units of Measurement for Radioactivity**

Two common units to measure the activity of a substance are the curie (Ci) and becquerel (Bq). A *curie* is a unit of measure of the rate of radioactive decay equal to  $3.7 \times 10^{10}$  disintegrations per second. This is approximately equivalent to the number of disintegrations that one gram of radium-226 will undergo in one second. A *becquerel* is a more fundamental unit of measure of radioactive decay that is equal to 1 disintegration per second. Currently, the curie is more widely used in the United States, but usage of the becquerel can be expected to broaden as the metric system slowly comes into wider use. The conversion between curies and becquerels is shown below.

$$1 \text{ curie} = 3.7 \times 10^{10} \text{ becquerels}$$

### **Variation of Radioactivity Over Time**

The rate at which a given radionuclide sample decays is stated in Equation (1-3) as being equal to the product of the number of atoms and the decay constant. From this basic relationship it is possible to use calculus to derive an expression which can be used to calculate how the number of atoms present will change over time. The derivation is beyond the scope of this text, but Equation (1-4) is the useful result.

$$N = N_0 e^{-\lambda t} \quad (1-4)$$

where:

N = number of atoms present at time t

$N_0$  = number of atoms initially present

$\lambda$  = decay constant (time<sup>-1</sup>)

t = time

Since the activity and the number of atoms are always proportional, they may be used interchangeably to describe any given radionuclide population. Therefore, the following is true.

$$A = A_0 e^{-\lambda t} \quad (1-5)$$

where:

A = activity present at time t

A<sub>0</sub> = activity initially present

λ = decay constant (time<sup>-1</sup>)

t = time

### **Radioactive Half-Life**

One of the most useful terms for estimating how quickly a nuclide will decay is the radioactive half-life. The *radioactive half-life* is defined as the amount of time required for the activity to decrease to one-half of its original value. A relationship between the half-life and decay constant can be developed from Equation (1-5). The half-life can be calculated by solving Equation (1-5) for the time, t, when the current activity, A, equals one-half the initial activity A<sub>0</sub>.

First, solve Equation (1-5) for t.

$$A = A_0 e^{-\lambda t}$$

$$\frac{A}{A_0} = e^{-\lambda t}$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{A}{A_0}\right) = -\lambda t$$

$$t = \frac{-\ln\left(\frac{A}{A_0}\right)}{\lambda}$$

If A is equal to one-half of A<sub>0</sub>, then A/A<sub>0</sub> is equal to one-half. Substituting this in the equation above yields an expression for t<sub>1/2</sub>.

$$t_{1/2} = \frac{-\ln\left(\frac{1}{2}\right)}{\lambda} \quad (1-6)$$

$$t_{1/2} = \frac{\ln 2}{\lambda} = \frac{0.693}{\lambda}$$

The basic features of decay of a radionuclide sample are shown by the graph in Figure 10.

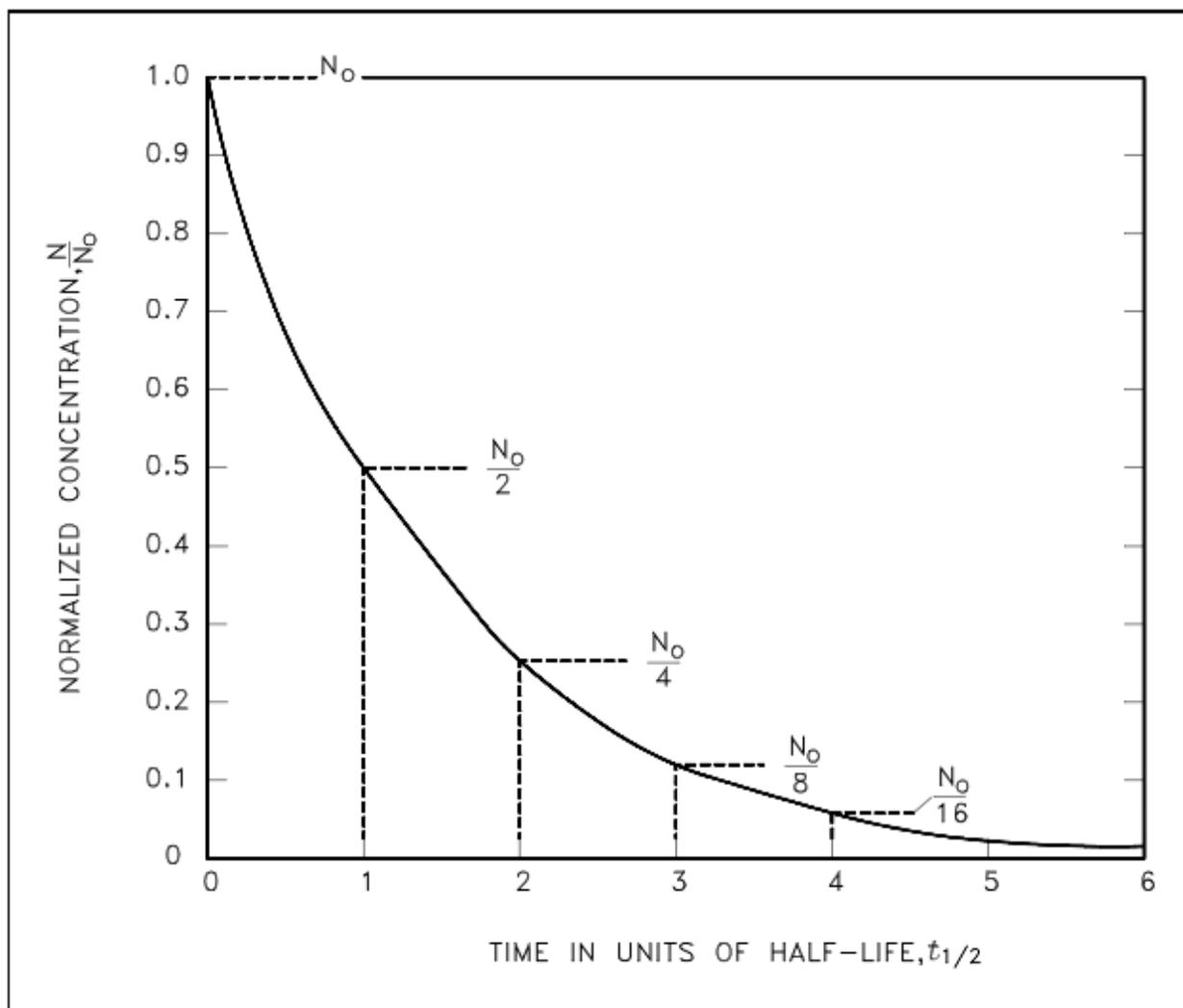


Figure 10: Radioactive Decay as a Function of Time in Units of Half-Life

Assuming an initial number of atoms  $N_0$ , the population, and consequently, the activity may be noted to decrease by one-half of this value in a time of one half-life. Additional decreases occur so that whenever one half-life elapses; the number of atoms drops to one-half of what its value was at the beginning of that time interval. After five half-lives have elapsed, only  $1/32$ , or 3.1%, of the original number of atoms remains. After seven half-lives, only  $1/128$ , or 0.78%, of the atoms remains. The number of atoms existing after 5 to 7 half-lives can usually be assumed to be negligible. Chemistry Fundamentals contains additional information on calculating the number of atoms contained within a sample.

Example:

A sample of material contains 20 micrograms of californium-252.

Californium-252 has a half-life of 2.638 years.

Calculate:

- The number of californium-252 atoms initially present
- The activity of the californium-252 in curies
- The number of californium-252 atoms that will remain in 12 years
- The time it will take for the activity to reach 0.001 curies

Solution:

- The number of atoms of californium-252 can be determined as below.

$$\begin{aligned}
 N_{Cf\ 252} &= mass \left( \frac{1\ mole}{isotopic\ mass} \right) \left( \frac{N_A}{1\ mole} \right) \\
 &= (20 \times 10^6\ g) \left( \frac{1\ mole}{252.08\ g} \right) \frac{6.022 \times 10^{23}}{1\ mole} \\
 &= 4.78 \times 10^{16}\ atoms
 \end{aligned}$$

- First, use Equation (1-6) to calculate the decay constant.

$$\begin{aligned}
 \lambda &= \frac{0.693}{t_{1/2}} \\
 &= \frac{0.693}{2.638\ yrs} \\
 &= 0.263\ yr^{-1}
 \end{aligned}$$

Use this value for the decay constant in Equation (1-3) to determine the activity.

$$A = \lambda N$$

$$\begin{aligned}
 &= (0.263\ yr^{-1})(4.78 \times 10^{16}\ atoms) \left( \frac{1\ yr}{365.25\ days} \right) \left( \frac{1\ day}{24\ hrs} \right) \left( \frac{1\ hr}{3600\ s} \right) \\
 &= \left( 3.98 \times 10^8 \frac{disintegrations}{s} \right) \left( \frac{1\ Curie}{3.7 \times 10^{10}\ disintegrations/s} \right) \\
 &= 0.0108\ Curies
 \end{aligned}$$

- The number of californium atoms that will remain in 12 years can be calculated from Equation (1-4).

$$\begin{aligned}
 N &= N_0 e^{-\lambda t} \\
 &= (4.78 \times 10^{16}) e^{- (0.263/yr) (12\ yr)} \\
 &= 2.04 \times 10^{15}
 \end{aligned}$$

- (d) The time that it will take for the activity to reach 0.001 Ci can be determined from Equation (1-5). First, solve Equation (1-5) for time.

$$A = A_0 e^{-\lambda t}$$

$$\frac{A}{A_0} = e^{-\lambda t}$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{A}{A_0}\right) = -\lambda t$$

$$t = \frac{-\ln\left(\frac{A}{A_0}\right)}{\lambda}$$

Inserting the appropriate values in the right side of this equation will result in the required time.

$$t = \frac{-\ln\left(\frac{0.001\text{Ci}}{0.0108\text{Ci}}\right)}{0.263\text{yr}^{-1}}$$

$$t = 9.05 \text{ yrs}$$

### **Plotting Radioactive Decay**

It is useful to plot the activity of a nuclide as it changes over time. Plots of this type can be used to determine when the activity will fall below a certain level. This plot is usually done showing activity on either a linear or a logarithmic scale. The decay of the activity of a single nuclide on a logarithmic scale will plot as a straight line because the decay is exponential.

Example:

Plot the radioactive decay curve for nitrogen-16 over a period of 100 seconds. The initial activity is 142 curies and the half-life of nitrogen-16 is 7.13 seconds. Plot the curve on both linear rectangular coordinates and on a semi-log scale.

Solution:

First, use Equation (1-6) to calculate the decay constant corresponding to a half-life of 7.13 seconds

$$t_{1/2} = \frac{\ln 2}{\lambda} = \frac{0.693}{\lambda}$$

$$\lambda = \frac{0.693}{t_{1/2}}$$

$$= \frac{0.693}{7.13 \text{ s}}$$

$$= 0.0972 \text{ s}^{-1}$$

Use the decay constant determined above to calculate the activity at various times using Equation (1-5).

$$A = A_0 e^{-\lambda t}$$

<u>Time</u>	<u>Activity</u>
0 seconds	142.0 Ci
20 seconds	20.3 Ci
40 seconds	2.91 Ci
60 seconds	0.416 Ci
80 seconds	0.0596 Ci
100 seconds	0.00853 Ci

Plotting the data points calculated above on both linear and semi-log scales results in the graphs shown in Figure 11.

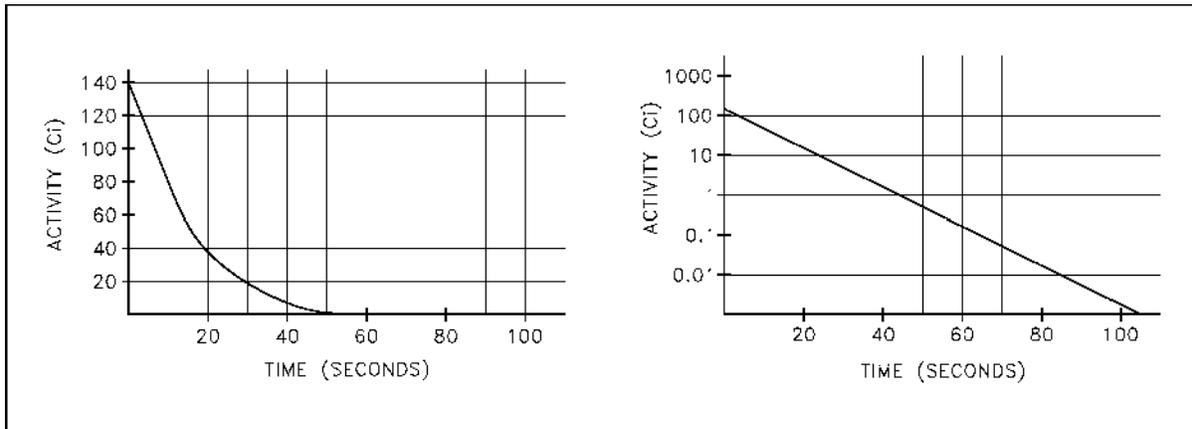


Figure 11: Linear and Semi-log Plots of Nitrogen-16 Decay

If a substance contains more than one radioactive nuclide, the total activity is the sum of the individual activities of each nuclide. As an example, consider a sample of material that contained  $1 \times 10^6$  atoms of iron-59 that has a half-life of 44.51 days ( $\lambda = 1.80 \times 10^{-7} \text{ s}^{-1}$ ),  $1 \times 10^6$  atoms of manganese-54 that has a half-life of 312.2 days ( $\lambda = 2.57 \times 10^{-8} \text{ s}^{-1}$ ), and  $1 \times 10^6$  atoms of cobalt-60 that has a half-life of 1925 days ( $\lambda = 4.17 \times 10^{-9} \text{ s}^{-1}$ ).

The initial activity of each of the nuclides would be the product of the number of atoms and the decay constant.

$$\begin{aligned}
 A_x &= N_x \lambda_x \\
 A_{\text{Fe-59}} &= (1 \times 10^6 \text{ atoms}) (1.80 \times 10^{-7} \text{ sec}^{-1}) \\
 &= 0.180 \text{ Ci} \\
 A_{\text{Mn-54}} &= (1 \times 10^6 \text{ atoms}) (2.57 \times 10^{-8} \text{ sec}^{-1}) \\
 &= 0.0257 \text{ Ci} \\
 A_{\text{Co-60}} &= (1 \times 10^6 \text{ atoms}) (4.17 \times 10^{-9} \text{ sec}^{-1}) \\
 &= 0.00417 \text{ Ci}
 \end{aligned}$$

Plotting the manner in which the activities of each of the three nuclides decay over time demonstrates that initially the activity of the shortest-lived nuclide (iron-59) dominates the total activity, then manganese-54 dominates. After almost all of the iron and manganese have decayed away, the only contributor to activity will be the cobalt-60. A plot of this combined decay is shown in Figure 12.

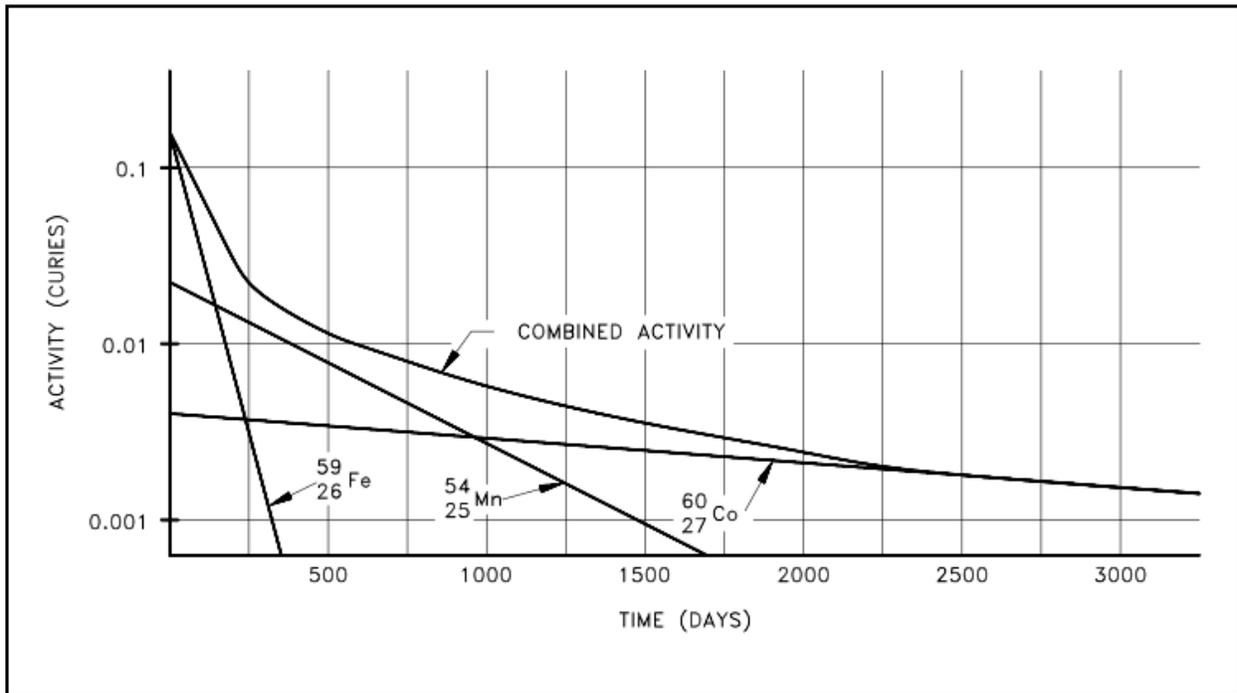


Figure 12: Combined Decay of Iron-56, Manganese-54, and Cobalt-60

### Radioactive Equilibrium

*Radioactive equilibrium* exists when a radioactive nuclide is decaying at the same rate at which it is being produced. Since the production rate and decay rate are equal, the number of atoms present remains constant over time.

An example of radioactive equilibrium is the concentration of sodium-24 in the coolant circulating through a sodium-cooled nuclear reactor. Assume that the sodium-24 is being produced at a rate of  $1 \times 10^6$  atoms per second. If the sodium-24 were stable and did not decay, the amount of sodium-24 present after some period of time could be calculated by multiplying the production rate by the amount of time. Plotting the amount of material present would result in the graph in Figure 13.

However, sodium-24 is not stable, and it decays with a half-life of 14.96 hours. If no sodium-24 is present initially and production starts at a rate of  $1 \times 10^6$  atoms per second, the rate of decay will initially be zero because there is no sodium-24 present to decay. The rate of decay of sodium-24 will increase as the amount of sodium-24 increases.

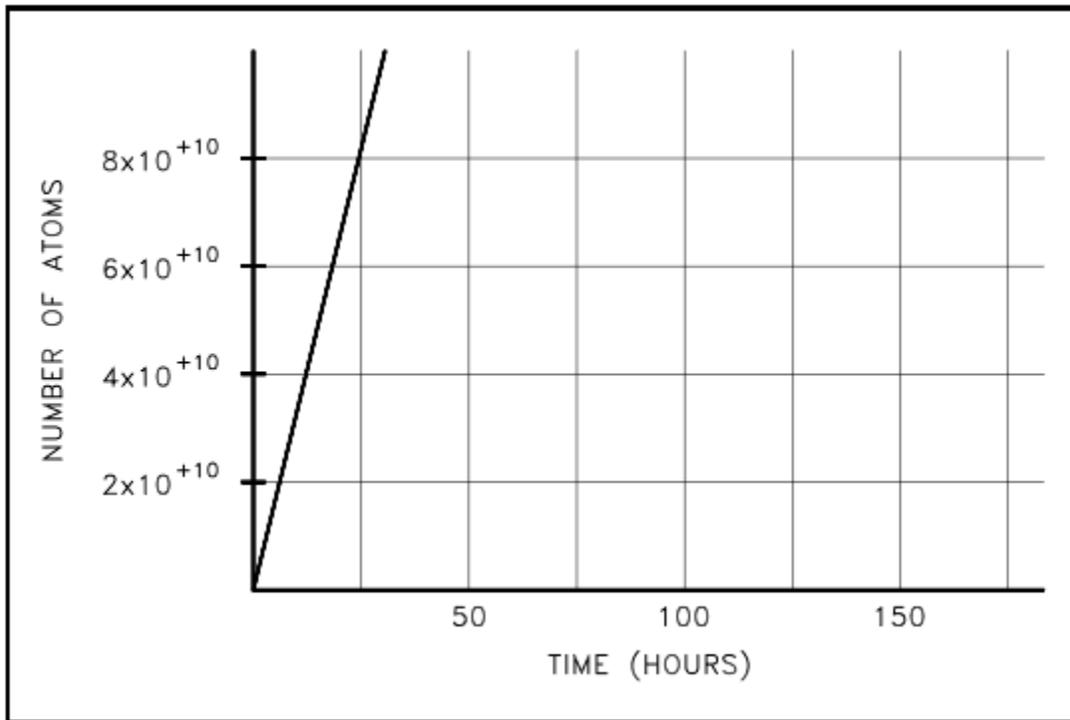


Figure 13: Cumulative Production of Sodium-24 Over Time

The amount of sodium-24 present will initially increase rapidly, and then it will increase at a continually decreasing rate until the rate of decay is equal to the rate of production. It is possible to calculate how much sodium-24 will be present at equilibrium by setting the production rate ( $R$ ) equal to the decay rate ( $\lambda N$ ).

$$R = \lambda N$$

$$N = R/\lambda$$

where:

$$R = \text{production rate (atoms/second)}$$

- $\lambda$  = decay constant ( $\text{second}^{-1}$ )
- $N$  = number of atoms

It is possible to calculate the equilibrium value for sodium-24 being produced at a rate of  $1 \times 10^6$  atoms/second.

$$\begin{aligned} \lambda &= \frac{0.693}{t_{1/2}} & N &= \frac{R}{\lambda} \\ &= \frac{0.693}{14.96\text{hr}} \left( \frac{1\text{hr}}{3600\text{s}} \right) & &= \frac{1 \times 10^6 \text{ atoms/s}}{1.287 \times 10^5 \text{ s}^{-1}} \\ &= 1.287 \times 10^5 \text{ s}^{-1} & &= 7.77 \times 10^{10} \text{ atoms} \end{aligned}$$

The development of the equation to calculate how the amount of sodium-24 changes over time as it approaches the equilibrium value is beyond the scope of this handbook. However, the equation is presented below.

$$N = \frac{R}{\lambda} (1 - e^{-\lambda t})$$

This equation can be used to calculate the values of the amount of sodium-24 present at different times. As the time increases, the exponential term approaches zero, and the number of atoms present will approach  $R/\lambda$ . A plot of the approach of sodium-24 to equilibrium is shown in Figure 14.

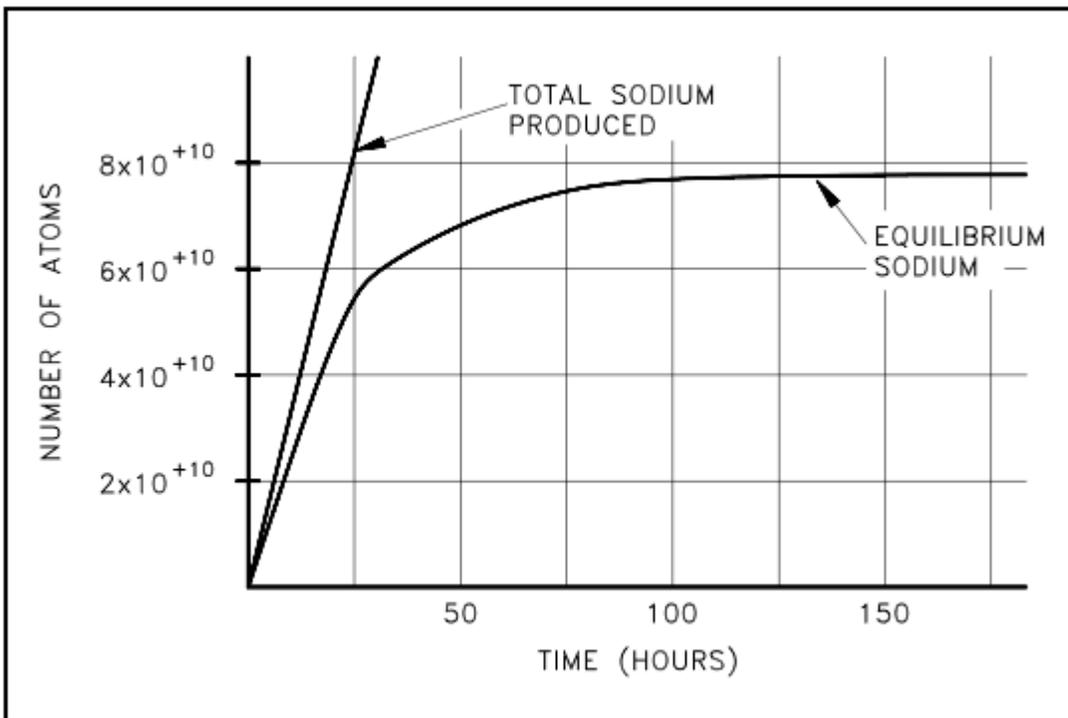
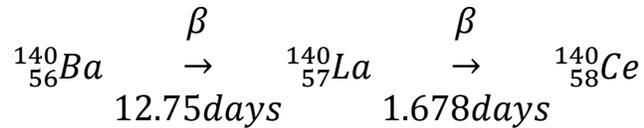


Figure 14 Approach of Sodium-24 to Equilibrium

**Transient Radioactive Equilibrium**

*Transient radioactive equilibrium* occurs when the parent nuclide and the daughter nuclide decay at essentially the same rate.

For transient equilibrium to occur, the parent must have a long half-life when compared to the daughter. An example of this type of compound decay process is barium-140, which decays by beta emission to lanthanum-140, which in turn decays by beta emission to stable cerium-140.



The decay constant for barium-140 is considerably smaller than the decay constant for lanthanum-140. Remember that the rate of decay of both the parent and daughter can be represented as  $\lambda N$ . Although the decay constant for barium-140 is smaller, the actual rate of decay ( $\lambda N$ ) is initially larger than that of lanthanum-140 because of the great difference in their initial concentrations. As the concentration of the daughter increases, the rate of decay of the daughter will approach and eventually match the decay rate of the parent. When this occurs, they are said to be in transient equilibrium. A plot of the barium-lanthanum-cerium decay chain reaching transient equilibrium is shown in Figure 15.

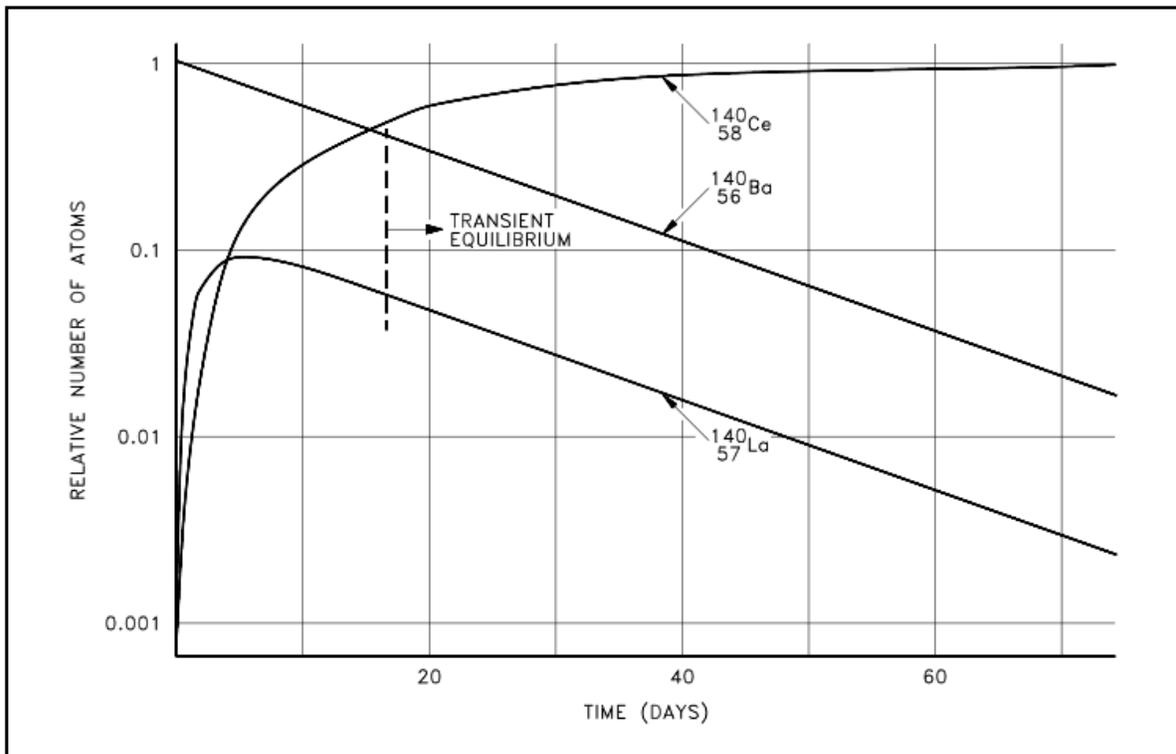


Figure 15: Transient Equilibrium in the Decay of Barium-140

*Secular equilibrium* occurs when the parent has an extremely long half-life. In the long decay chain for a naturally radioactive element, such as thorium-232, where all of the elements in the chain are in secular equilibrium, each of the descendants has built up to an equilibrium amount and all decay at the rate set by the original parent. The only exception is the final stable element on the end of the chain. Its number of atoms is constantly increasing.

### Summary

The important information in this chapter is summarized on the following page.

#### **Radioactivity Summary**

- Radioactivity is the decay of unstable atoms by the emission of particles and electromagnetic radiation.
- A curie (Ci) is a unit of radioactivity equal to  $3.7 \times 10^{10}$  disintegrations per second.
- A becquerel (Bq) is a unit of radioactivity equal to 1 disintegration per second.
- The radioactive decay constant ( $\lambda$ ) is the probability per unit time that an atom will decay.
- The radioactive half-life is the amount of time required for the activity to decrease to one-half its original value.
- The activity of a substance can be calculated from the number of atoms and the decay constant based on the equation below.

$$A = \lambda N$$

- The amount of activity remaining after a particular time can be calculated from the equation below.

$$A = A_0 e^{-\lambda t}$$

- The relationship between the decay constant and the half-life is shown below.

$$T_{1/2} = 0.693 / \lambda$$

- Plots of radioactive decay can be useful to describe the variation of activity over time. If decay is plotted using semi-log scale the plot results in a straight line.
- Radioactive equilibrium exists when the production rate of a material is equal to the removal rate.

- Transient radioactive equilibrium exists when the parent nuclide and the daughter nuclide decay at essentially the same rate. This occurs only when the parent has a long half-life compared to the daughter.

## **NEUTRON INTERACTIONS**

*Neutrons can cause many different types of interactions. The neutron may simply scatter off the nucleus in two different ways, or it may actually be absorbed into the nucleus. If a neutron is absorbed into the nucleus, it may result in the emission of a gamma ray or a subatomic particle, or it may cause the nucleus to fission.*

- EO 3.1 **DESCRIBE** the following scattering interactions between a neutron and a nucleus:
- Elastic scattering
  - Inelastic scattering
- EO 3.2 **STATE** the conservation laws that apply to an elastic collision between a neutron and a nucleus.
- EO 3.3 **DESCRIBE** the following reactions where a neutron is absorbed in a nucleus:
- Radiative capture
  - Particle ejection

### **Scattering**

A neutron *scattering* reaction occurs when a nucleus, after having been struck by a neutron, emits a single neutron. Despite the fact that the initial and final neutrons do not need to be (and often are not) the same, the net effect of the reaction is as if the projectile neutron had merely "bounced off," or scattered from, the nucleus. The two categories of scattering reactions, elastic and inelastic scattering, are described in the following paragraphs.

### **Elastic Scattering**

In an *elastic scattering* reaction between a neutron and a target nucleus, there is no energy transferred into nuclear excitation. Momentum and kinetic energy of the "system" are conserved although there is usually some transfer of kinetic energy from the neutron to the target nucleus. The target nucleus gains the amount of kinetic energy that the neutron loses.

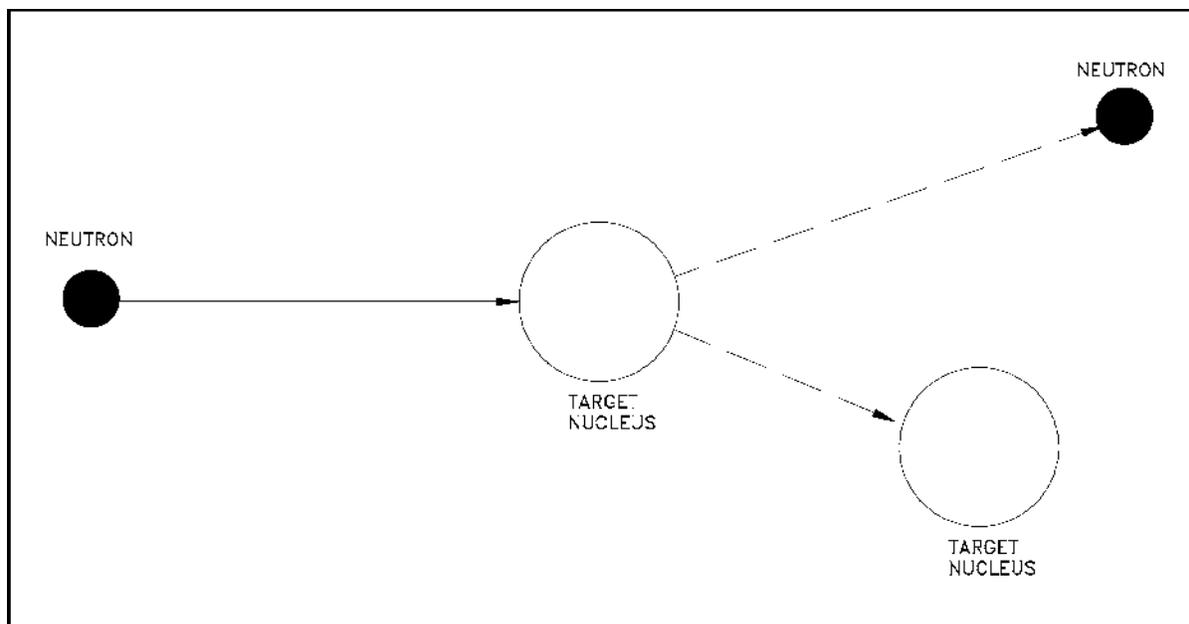


Figure 16: Elastic Scattering

Figure 16 illustrates the process of elastic scattering of a neutron off a target nucleus. In the elastic scattering reaction, the conservation of momentum and kinetic energy is represented by the equations below.

Conservation of momentum ( $mv$ )

$$(m_n v_{n,i}) + (m_T v_{T,i}) = (m_n v_{n,f}) + (m_T v_{T,f})$$

Conservation of kinetic energy ( $\frac{1}{2} m v^2$ )

$$\left(\frac{1}{2} m_n v_{n,i}^2\right) + \left(\frac{1}{2} m_T v_{T,i}^2\right) = \left(\frac{1}{2} m_n v_{n,f}^2\right) + \left(\frac{1}{2} m_T v_{T,f}^2\right)$$

Where:

- $m_n$  = mass of the neutron
- $m_T$  = mass of the target nucleus
- $v_{n,i}$  = initial neutron velocity
- $v_{n,f}$  = final neutron velocity
- $v_{T,i}$  = initial target velocity
- $v_{T,f}$  = final target velocity

Elastic scattering of neutrons by nuclei can occur in two ways. The more unusual of the two interactions is the absorption of the neutron, forming a compound nucleus, followed by the re-emission of a neutron in such a way that the total kinetic energy is conserved and the nucleus returns to its ground state. This is known as *resonance elastic*

*scattering* and is very dependent upon the initial kinetic energy possessed by the neutron. Due to formation of the compound nucleus, it is also referred to as compound elastic scattering. The second, more usual method is termed *potential elastic scattering* and can be understood by visualizing the neutrons and nuclei to be much like billiard balls with impenetrable surfaces. Potential scattering takes place with incident neutrons that have energy of up to about 1 MeV. In potential scattering, the neutron does not actually touch the nucleus and a compound nucleus is not formed. Instead, the neutron is acted on and scattered by the short range nuclear forces when it approaches close enough to the nucleus.

### **Inelastic Scattering**

In *inelastic scattering*, the incident neutron is absorbed by the target nucleus, forming a compound nucleus. The compound nucleus will then emit a neutron of lower kinetic energy which leaves the original nucleus in an excited state. The nucleus will usually, by one or more gamma emissions, emit this excess energy to reach its ground state. Figure 17 shows the process of inelastic scattering.

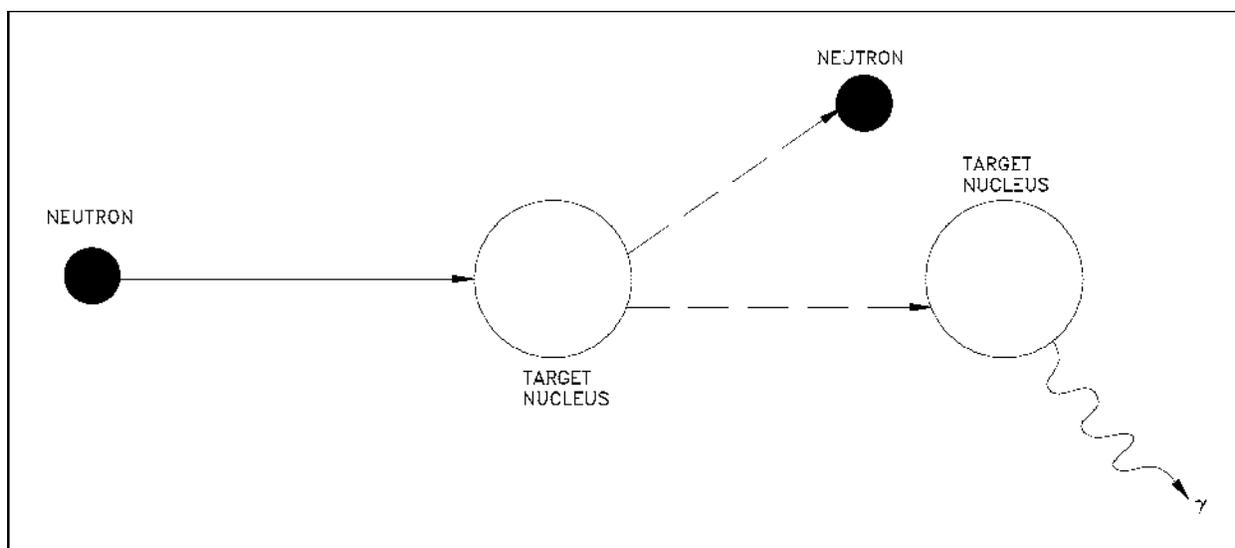


Figure 17 Inelastic Scattering

For the nucleus that has reached its ground state, the sum of the kinetic energy of the exit neutron, the target nucleus, and the total gamma energy emitted is equal to the initial kinetic energy of the incident neutron.

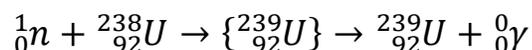
### **Absorption Reactions**

Most *absorption reactions* result in the loss of a neutron coupled with the production of a charged particle or gamma ray. When the product nucleus is radioactive, additional radiation is emitted at some later time. Radiative capture, particle ejection,

and fission are all categorized as absorption reactions and are briefly described below.

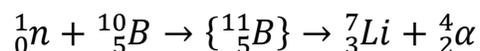
### **Radiative Capture**

In *radiative capture* the incident neutron enters the target nucleus forming a compound nucleus. The compound nucleus then decays to its ground state by gamma emission. An example of a radiative capture reaction is shown below.



### **Particle Ejection**

In a *particle ejection* reaction the incident particle enters the target nucleus forming a compound nucleus. The newly formed compound nucleus has been excited to a high enough energy level to cause it to eject a new particle while the incident neutron remains in the nucleus. After the new particle is ejected, the remaining nucleus may or may not exist in an excited state depending upon the mass-energy balance of the reaction. An example of a particle ejection reaction is shown below.



### **Fission**

One of the most important interactions that neutrons can cause is fission, in which the nucleus that absorbs the neutron actually splits into two similarly sized parts. Fission will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

### **Summary**

The important information in this chapter is summarized on the next page.

### Neutron Interactions Summary

- Interactions where a neutron scatters off a target nucleus are either elastic or inelastic. In elastic scattering, kinetic energy and momentum are conserved and no energy is transferred into excitation energy of the target nucleus. In inelastic scattering, some amount of kinetic energy is transferred into excitation energy of the target nucleus.
- The conservation principles that apply to an elastic collision are conservation of kinetic energy and conservation of momentum.
- Radiative capture is the absorption of a neutron by the target nucleus, resulting in an excited nucleus which subsequently (typically within a small fraction of a second) releases its excitation energy in the form of a gamma ray.
- Particle ejection occurs when a neutron is absorbed by a target nucleus, resulting in the formation of a compound nucleus. The compound nucleus immediately ejects a particle (for example, alpha or proton).

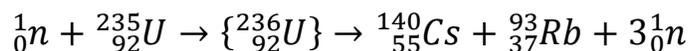
## NUCLEAR FISSION

*Nuclear fission is a process in which an atom splits and releases energy, fission products, and neutrons. The neutrons released by fission can, in turn, cause the fission of other atoms.*

- EO 4.1 **EXPLAIN** the fission process using the liquid drop model of a nucleus.
- EO 4.2 **DEFINE** the following terms:
- a. Excitation energy ( $E_{\text{exc}}$ )
  - b. Critical energy ( $E_{\text{crit}}$ )
- EO 4.3 **DEFINE** the following terms:
- a. Fissile material
  - b. Fissionable material
  - c. Fertile material
- EO 4.4 **DESCRIBE** the processes of transmutation, conversion, and breeding.
- EO 4.5 **DESCRIBE** the curve of Binding Energy per Nucleon versus mass number and give a qualitative description of the reasons for its shape.
- EO 4.6 **EXPLAIN** why only the heaviest nuclei are easily fissioned.
- EO 4.7 **EXPLAIN** why uranium-235 fissions with thermal neutrons and uranium-238 fissions only with fast neutrons.

### Fission

In the fission reaction the incident neutron enters the heavy target nucleus, forming a compound nucleus that is excited to such a high energy level ( $E_{\text{exc}} > E_{\text{crit}}$ ) that the nucleus "splits" (fissions) into two large fragments plus some neutrons. An example of a typical fission reaction is shown below.



A large amount of energy is released in the form of radiation and fragment kinetic energy.

### Liquid Drop Model of a Nucleus

The nucleus is held together by the attractive nuclear force between nucleons, which was discussed in a previous chapter. The characteristics of the nuclear force are listed below.

- (a) very short range, with essentially no effect beyond nuclear dimensions ( $\sim 10^{-13}$  cm)
- (b) stronger than the repulsive electrostatic forces within the nucleus
- (c) independent of nucleon pairing, in that the attractive forces between pairs of neutrons are no different than those between pairs of protons or a neutron and a proton
- (d) saturable, that is, a nucleon can attract only a few of its nearest neighbors

One theory of fission considers the fissioning of a nucleus similar in some respects to the splitting of a liquid drop. This analogy is justifiable to some extent by the fact that a liquid drop is held together by molecular forces that tend to make the drop spherical in shape and that try to resist any deformation in the same manner as nuclear forces are assumed to hold the nucleus together. By considering the nucleus as a liquid drop, the fission process can be described.

Referring to Figure 18(A), the nucleus in the ground state is undistorted, and its attractive nuclear forces are greater than the repulsive electrostatic forces between the protons within the nucleus. When an incident particle (in this instance a neutron) is absorbed by the target nucleus, a compound nucleus is formed. The compound nucleus temporarily contains all the charge and mass involved in the reaction and exists in an excited state. The excitation energy added to the compound nucleus is equal to the binding energy contributed by the incident particle plus the kinetic energy possessed by that particle. Figure 18(B) illustrates the excitation energy thus imparted to the compound nucleus, which may cause it to oscillate and become distorted. If the excitation energy is greater than a certain critical energy, the oscillations may cause the compound nucleus to become dumbbell-shaped. When this happens, the attractive nuclear forces (short-range) in the neck area are small due to saturation, while the repulsive electrostatic forces (long-range) are only slightly less than before. When the repulsive electrostatic forces exceed the attractive nuclear forces, nuclear fission occurs, as illustrated in Figure 18(C).

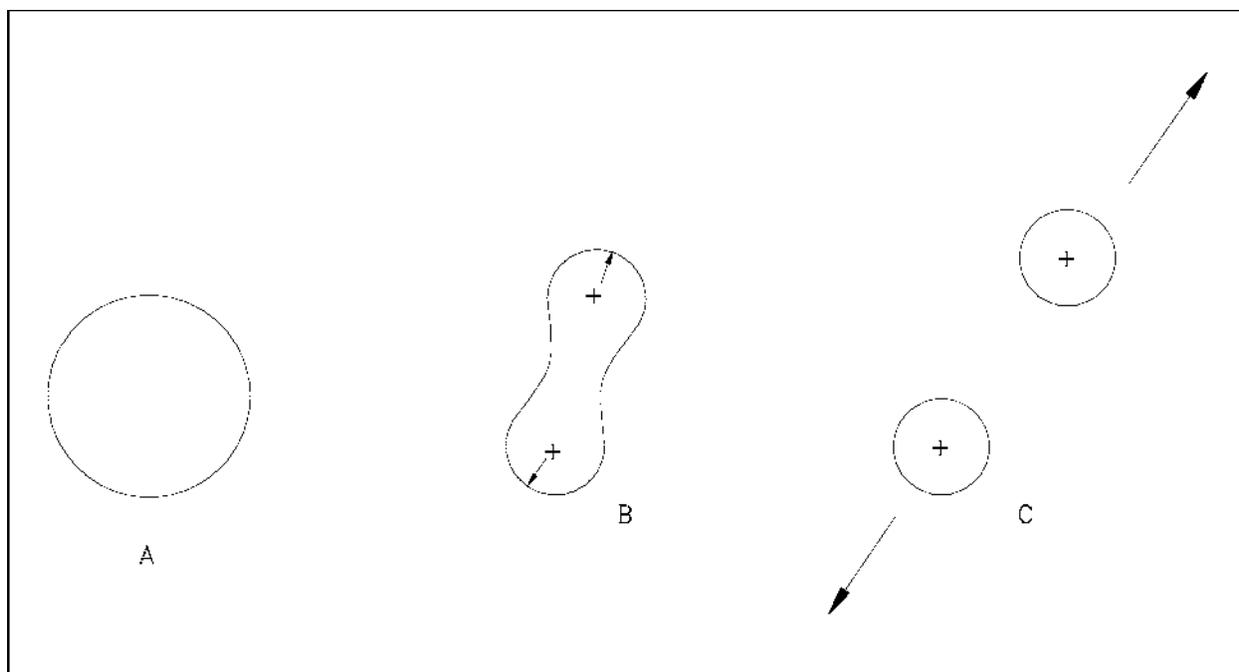


Figure 18 Liquid Drop Model of Fission

### **Critical Energy**

The measure of how far the energy level of a nucleus is above its ground state is called the *excitation energy* ( $E_{\text{exc}}$ ). For fission to occur, the excitation energy must be above a particular value for that nuclide. The *critical energy* ( $E_{\text{crit}}$ ) is the minimum excitation energy required for fission to occur.

### **Fissile Material**

A *fissile material* is composed of nuclides for which fission is possible with neutrons of any energy level. What is especially significant about these nuclides is their ability to be fissioned with zero kinetic energy neutrons (thermal neutrons). Thermal neutrons have very low kinetic energy levels (essentially zero) because they are roughly in equilibrium with the thermal motion of surrounding materials. Therefore, in order to be classified as fissile, a material must be capable of fissioning after absorbing a thermal neutron. Consequently, they impart essentially no kinetic energy to the reaction. Fission is possible in these materials with thermal neutrons, since the change in binding energy supplied by the neutron addition alone is high enough to exceed the critical energy. Some examples of fissile nuclides are uranium-235, uranium-233, and plutonium-239.

### **Fissionable Material**

A *fissionable material* is composed of nuclides for which fission with neutrons is possible. All fissile nuclides fall into this category. However, also included are those

nuclides that can be fissioned only with high energy neutrons. The change in binding energy that occurs as the result of neutron absorption results in a nuclear excitation energy level that is less than the required critical energy. Therefore, the additional excitation energy must be supplied by the kinetic energy of the incident neutron. The reason for this difference between fissile and fissionable materials is the so-called odd-even effect for nuclei. It has been observed that nuclei with even numbers of neutrons and/or protons are more stable than those with odd numbers. Therefore, adding a neutron to change a nucleus with an odd number of neutrons to a nucleus with an even number of neutrons produces an appreciably higher binding energy than adding a neutron to a nucleus already possessing an even number of neutrons. Some examples of nuclides requiring high energy neutrons to cause fission are thorium-232, uranium-238, and plutonium-240. Table 4 indicates the critical energy ( $E_{crit.}$ ) and the binding energy change for an added neutron ( $BE_n$ ) to target nuclei of interest. For fission to be possible, the change in binding energy plus the kinetic energy must equal or exceed the critical energy ( $\Delta BE + KE \geq E_{crit}$ )

Target Nucleus	Critical Energy $E_{crit}$	Binding Energy of Last Neutron $BE_n$	$BE_n - E_{crit}$
${}_{90}\text{Th}^{232}$	7.5 MeV	5.4 MeV	-2.1 MeV
${}_{92}\text{U}^{238}$	7.0 MeV	5.5 MeV	-1.5 MeV
${}_{92}\text{U}^{235}$	6.5 MeV	6.8 MeV	+0.3 MeV
${}_{92}\text{U}^{233}$	6.0 MeV	7.0 MeV	+1.0 MeV
${}_{94}\text{Pu}^{239}$	5.0 MeV	6.6 MeV	+1.6 MeV

Uranium-235 fissions with thermal neutrons because the binding energy released by the absorption of a neutron is greater than the critical energy for fission; therefore uranium-235 is a fissile material. The binding energy released by uranium-238 absorbing a thermal neutron is less than the critical energy, so additional energy must be possessed by the neutron for fission to be possible. Consequently, uranium-238 is a fissionable material.

### **Fertile Material**

All of the neutron absorption reactions that do not result in fission lead to the production of new nuclides through the process known as *transmutation*. These nuclides can, in turn, be transmuted again or may undergo radioactive decay to produce still different

nuclides. The nuclides that are produced by this process are referred to as transmutation products. Because several of the fissile nuclides do not exist in nature, they can only be produced by nuclear reactions (transmutation). The target nuclei for such reactions are said to be fertile. *Fertile materials* are materials that can undergo transmutation to become fissile materials. Figure 19 traces the transmutation mechanism by which two fertile nuclides, thorium-232 and uranium-238, produce uranium-233 and plutonium-239, respectively.

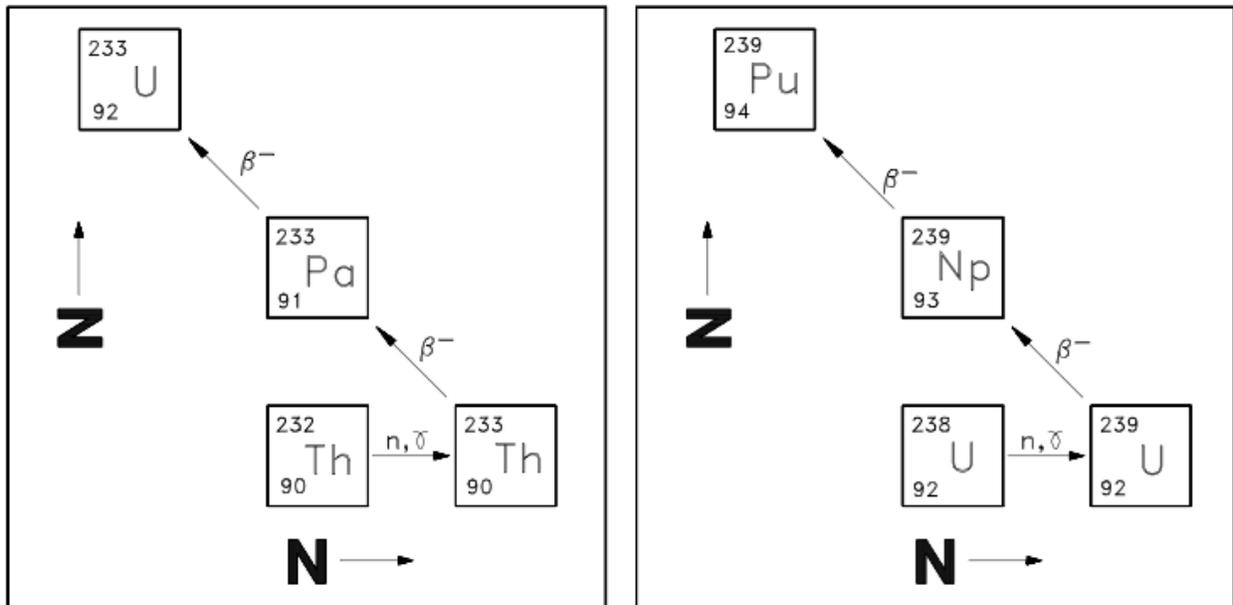


Figure 19: Conversion of Fertile Nuclides to Fissile Nuclides

If a reactor contains fertile material in addition to its fissile fuel, some new fuel will be produced as the original fuel is burned up. This is called *conversion*. Reactors that are specifically designed to produce fissionable fuel are called "breeder" reactors. In such reactors, the amount of fissionable fuel produced is greater than the amount of fuel burned. If less fuel is produced than used, the process is called conversion, and the reactor is termed a "converter."

### **Binding Energy Per Nucleon (BE/A)**

As the number of particles in a nucleus increases, the total binding energy also increases. The rate of increase, however, is not uniform. This lack of uniformity results in a variation in the amount of binding energy associated with each nucleon within the nucleus. This variation in the binding energy per nucleon (BE/A) is easily seen when the average BE/A is plotted versus atomic mass number (A), as shown in Figure 20.

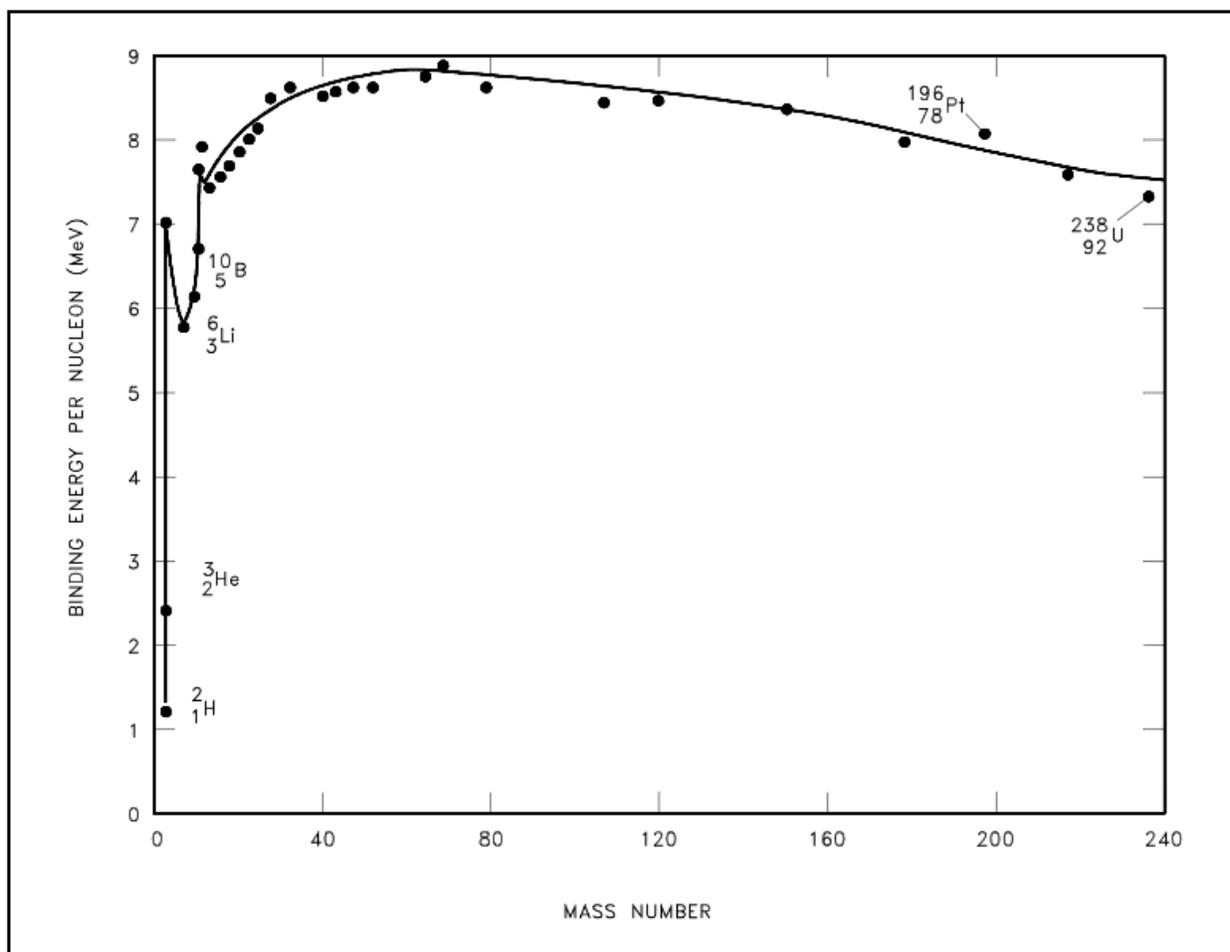


Figure 20: Binding Energy per Nucleon vs. Mass Number

Figure 20 illustrates that as the atomic mass number increases, the binding energy per nucleon decreases for  $A > 60$ . The BE/A curve reaches a maximum value of 8.79 MeV at  $A = 56$  and decreases to about 7.6 MeV for  $A = 238$ . The general shape of the BE/A curve can be explained using the general properties of nuclear forces. The nucleus is held together by very short-range attractive forces that exist between nucleons. On the other hand, the nucleus is being forced apart by long range repulsive electrostatic (coulomb) forces that exist between all the protons in the nucleus.

As the atomic number and the atomic mass number increase, the repulsive electrostatic forces within the nucleus increase due to the greater number of protons in the heavy elements. To overcome this increased repulsion, the proportion of neutrons in the nucleus must increase to maintain stability. This increase in the neutron-to-proton ratio only partially compensates for the growing proton-proton repulsive force in the heavier, naturally occurring elements. Because the repulsive forces are increasing, less energy must be supplied, on the average, to remove a nucleon from the nucleus. The BE/A has decreased. The BE/A of a nucleus is an indication of its degree of stability. Generally,

the more stable nuclides have higher  $BE/A$  than the less stable ones. The increase in the  $BE/A$  as the atomic mass number decreases from 260 to 60 is the primary reason for the energy liberation in the fission process. In addition, the increase in the  $BE/A$  as the atomic mass number increases from 1 to 60 is the reason for the energy liberation in the fusion process, which is the opposite reaction of fission.

The heaviest nuclei require only a small distortion from a spherical shape (small energy addition) for the relatively large coulomb forces forcing the two halves of the nucleus apart to overcome the attractive nuclear forces holding the two halves together. Consequently, the heaviest nuclei are easily fissionable compared to lighter nuclei.

### **Summary**

The important information in this chapter is summarized on the following page.

### Nuclear Fission Summary

- The fission process can be explained using the liquid drop model of a nucleus. In the ground state the nucleus is nearly spherical in shape. After the absorption of a neutron, the nucleus will be in an excited state and start to oscillate and become distorted. If the oscillations cause the nucleus to become shaped like a dumbbell, the repulsive electrostatic forces will overcome the short-range attractive nuclear forces, and the nucleus will split in two.
- Excitation energy is the amount of energy a nucleus has above its ground state.
- Critical energy is the minimum excitation energy that a nucleus must have before it can fission.
- Fissile material is material for which fission is possible with neutrons that have zero kinetic energy. Fissionable material is material for which fission caused by neutron absorption is possible provided the kinetic energy added with the binding energy is greater than the critical energy. Fertile material is material that can undergo transmutation to become fissile material.
- Transmutation is the process of neutron absorption and subsequent decay, which changes one nuclide to another nuclide. Conversion is the process of transmuting fertile material into fissile material in a reactor, where the amount of fissile material produced is less than the amount of fissile material consumed. Breeding is the same as conversion, except the amount of fissile material produced is more than the amount of fissile material consumed.
- The curve of binding energy per nucleon increases quickly through the light nuclides and reaches a maximum at a mass number of about 56. The curve decreases slowly for mass numbers greater than 60.
- The heaviest nuclei are easily fissionable because they require only a small distortion from the spherical shape to allow the coulomb forces to overcome the attractive nuclear force, forcing the two halves of the nucleus apart.
- Uranium-235 fissions with thermal neutrons because the binding energy released by the absorption of a neutron is greater than the critical energy for fission. The binding energy released by uranium-238 absorbing a neutron is less than the critical energy, so additional kinetic energy must be possessed by the neutron for fission to be possible.

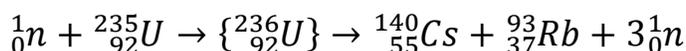
## ENERGY RELEASE FROM FISSION

*Fission of heavy nuclides converts a small amount of mass into an enormous amount of energy. The amount of energy released by fission can be determined based on either the change in mass that occurs during the reaction or by the difference in binding energy per nucleon between the fissile nuclide and the fission products.*

- EO 4.8 CHARACTERIZE the fission products in terms of mass groupings and radioactivity.
- EO 4.9 Given the nuclides involved and their masses, CALCULATE the energy released from fission.
- EO 4.10 Given the curve of Binding Energy per nucleon versus mass number, CALCULATE the energy released from fission.

### Calculation of Fission Energy

Nuclear fission results in the release of enormous quantities of energy. It is necessary to be able to calculate the amount of energy that will be produced. The logical manner in which to pursue this is to first investigate a typical fission reaction such as the one listed below.



It can be seen that when the compound nucleus splits, it breaks into two fission fragments, rubidium-93, cesium-140, and some neutrons. Both fission products then decay by multiple  $\beta^-$  emissions as a result of the high neutron-to-proton ratio possessed by these nuclides.

In most cases, the resultant fission fragments have masses that vary widely. Figure 21 gives the percent yield for atomic mass numbers. The most probable pair of fission fragments for the thermal fission of the fuel uranium-235 have masses of about 95 and 140. Note that the vertical axis of the fission yield curve is on a logarithmic scale. Therefore, the formation of fission fragments of mass numbers of about 95 and 140 is highly likely.

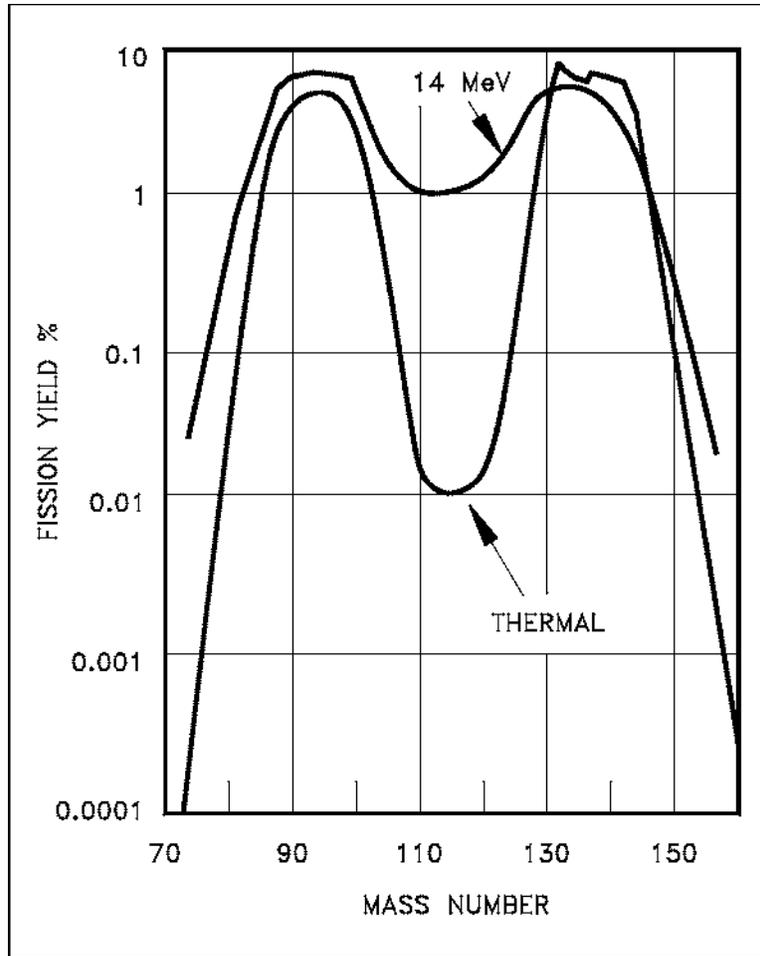


Figure 21 Uranium-235 Fission Yield vs. Mass Number

Referring now to the binding energy per nucleon curve (Figure 20), we can estimate the amount of energy released by our "typical" fission by plotting this reaction on the curve and calculating the change in binding energy (ABE) between the reactants on the left-hand side of the fission equation and the products on the right-hand side. Plotting the reactant and product nuclides on the curve shows that the total binding energy of the system after fission is greater than the total binding energy of the system before fission. When there is an increase in the total binding energy of a system, the system has become more stable by releasing an amount of energy equal to the increase in total binding energy of the system. Therefore, in the fission process, the energy liberated is equal to the increase in the total binding energy of the system.

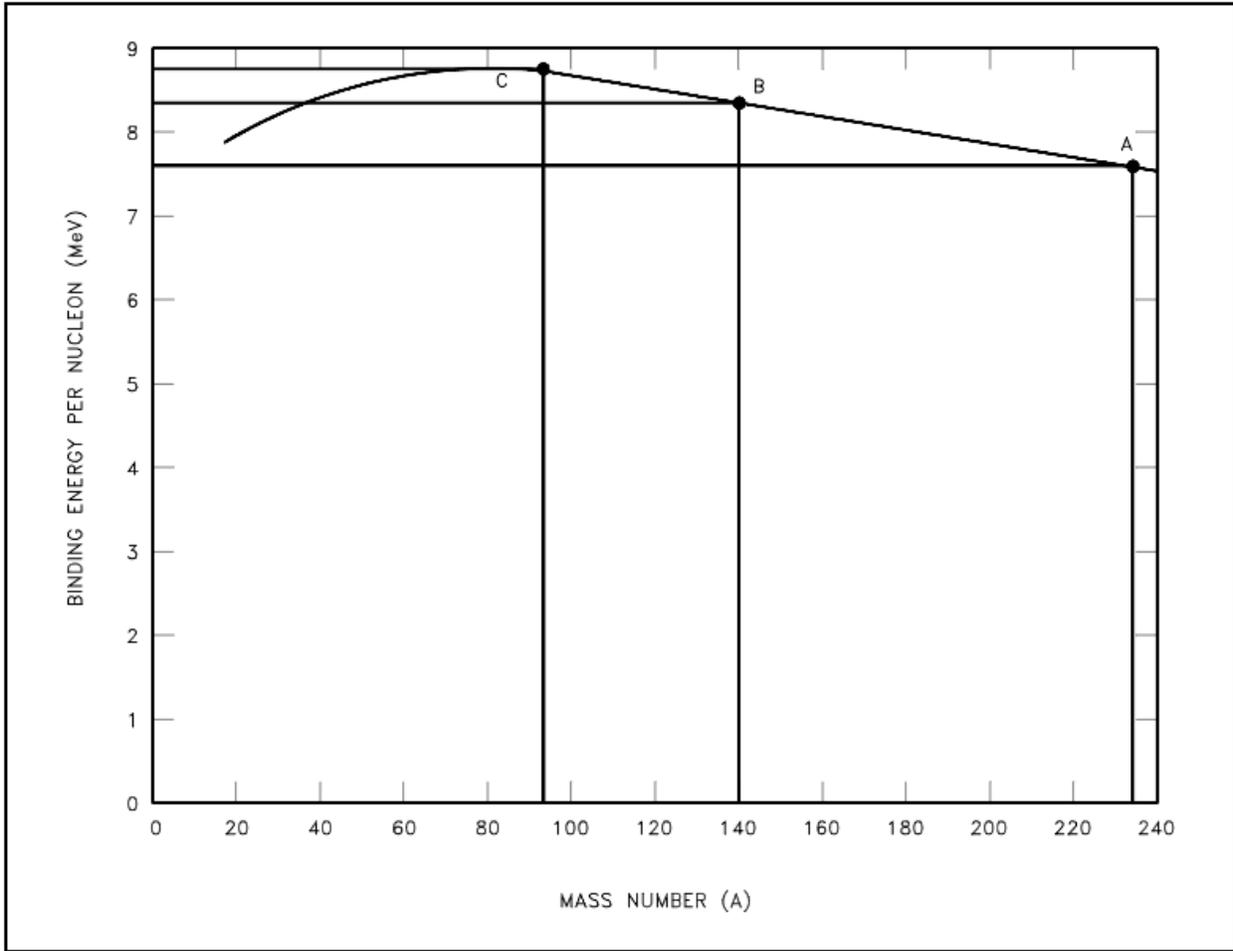


Figure 22 Change in Binding Energy for Typical Fission

Figure 22 graphically depicts that the binding energy per nucleon for the products (C, rubidium-93 and B, cesium-140) is greater than that for the reactant (A, uranium-235). The total binding energy for a nucleus can be found by multiplying the binding energy per nucleon by the number of nucleons.

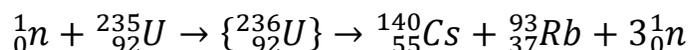
<b>TABLE 5</b> <b>Binding Energies Calculated from</b> <b>Binding Energy per Nucleon Curve</b>			
Nuclide	B.E. per Nucleon (BE/A)	Mass Number (A)	Binding Energy (BE/A) x (A)
$_{37}\text{Rb}^{93}$	8.7 MeV	93	809 MeV
$_{55}\text{Cs}^{140}$	8.4 MeV	140	1176 MeV
$_{92}\text{U}^{235}$	7.6 MeV	235	1786 MeV

The energy released will be equivalent to the difference in binding energy (ABE) between the reactants and the products.

$$\begin{aligned}
 \Delta BE &= BE_{\text{products}} - BE_{\text{reactants}} \\
 &= (BE_{\text{Rb-93}} + BE_{\text{Cs-140}}) - (BE_{\text{U-235}}) \\
 &= (809 \text{ MeV} + 1176 \text{ MeV}) - 1786 \text{ MeV} \\
 &= 199 \text{ MeV}
 \end{aligned}$$

The energy liberation during the fission process can also be explained from the standpoint of the conservation of mass-energy. During the fission process, there is a decrease in the mass of the system. There must, therefore, be energy liberated equal to the energy equivalent of the mass lost in the process. This method is more accurate than the previously illustrated method and is used when actually calculating the energy liberated during the fission process.

Again, referring to the "typical" fission reaction –



$E_{\text{Inst}}$ , the instantaneous energy, is the energy released immediately after the fission process. It is equal to the energy equivalent of the mass lost in the fission process. It can be calculated as shown below.

<u>Mass of the Reactants</u>		<u>Mass of the Products</u>	
${}^{235}_{92}\text{U}$	235.043924 amu	${}^{93}_{37}\text{Rb}$	92.91699 amu
${}^1_0n$	1.008665 amu	${}^{140}_{55}\text{Cs}$	139.90910 amu
		$3 ({}^1_0n)$	3.02599 amu
236.052589 amu		235.85208 amu	

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Mass difference} &= \text{Mass of Reactants} - \text{Mass of Products} \\
 &= 236.052589 \text{ amu} - 235.85208 \text{ amu} \\
 &= 0.200509 \text{ amu}
 \end{aligned}$$

This mass difference can be converted to an energy equivalent.

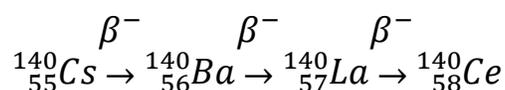
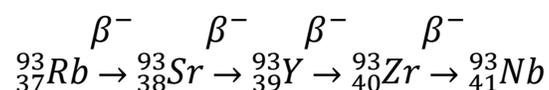
$$\begin{aligned}
 E_{\text{mst}} &= 0.200509 \text{ amu} \left( \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{\text{amu}} \right) \\
 &= 186.8 \text{ MeV}
 \end{aligned}$$

The total energy released per fission will vary from the fission to the next depending on what fission products are formed, but the average total energy released per fission of uranium-235 with a thermal neutron is 200 MeV.

As illustrated in the preceding example, the majority of the energy liberated in the fission process is released immediately after the fission occurs and appears as the kinetic energy of the fission fragments, kinetic energy of the fission neutrons, and instantaneous gamma rays. The remaining energy is released over a period of time after the fission occurs and appears as kinetic energy of the beta, neutrino, and decay gamma rays.

### Estimation of Decay Energy

In addition to this instantaneous energy release during the actual fission reaction, there is additional energy released when the fission fragments decay by  $\beta^-$  emission. This additional energy is called decay energy,  $E_{\text{Decay}}$ . The decay chains for rubidium-93 and cesium-140 are shown below.



The energy released during the decay for each chain will be equivalent to the mass difference between the original fission product and the sum of the final stable nuclide and the beta particles emitted.

The energy released in the decay chain of rubidium-93 is calculated below.

$$\begin{aligned} E_{\text{Decay}} &= \left[ m_{\text{Rb-93}} - \left( m_{\text{Nb-93}} + 4 m_{\text{electron}} \right) \right] \left( \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{\text{amu}} \right) \\ &= \left[ 92.91699 \text{ amu} - \left( 92.90638 \text{ amu} + 4 (0.0005486 \text{ amu}) \right) \right] \left( \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{\text{amu}} \right) \\ &= 0.008416 \text{ amu} \left( \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{\text{amu}} \right) \\ &= 7.84 \text{ MeV} \end{aligned}$$

The energy released in the decay chain of cesium-140 is calculated below.

$$\begin{aligned}
 E_{\text{Decay}} &= \left[ m_{\text{Rb-93}} - \left( m_{\text{Nb-93}} + 3 m_{\text{electron}} \right) \right] \left( \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{\text{amu}} \right) \\
 &= \left[ 139.90910 \text{ amu} - \left( 139.90543 \text{ amu} + 3 (0.0005486 \text{ amu}) \right) \right] \left( \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{\text{amu}} \right) \\
 &= 0.000202 \text{ amu} \left( \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{\text{amu}} \right) \\
 &= 1.89 \text{ MeV}
 \end{aligned}$$

The total decay energy is the sum of the energies of the two chains, or 9.73 MeV.

**Distribution of Fission Energy**

The average energy distribution for the energy released per fission with a thermal neutron in uranium-235 is shown in Tables 6 and 7.

<b>TABLE 6</b>	
<b><u>Instantaneous Energy from Fission</u></b>	
Kinetic Energy of Fission Products	167 Mev
Energy of Fission Neutrons	5 MeV
Instantaneous Gamma-ray Energy	5 MeV
Capture Gamma-ray Energy	10 MeV
Total Instantaneous Energy	187 MeV
<b>TABLE 7</b>	
<b><u>Delayed Energy from Fission</u></b>	
Beta Particles From Fission Products	7 Mev
Gamma-rays from Fission Products	6 MeV
Neutrinos	10 MeV
Total Delayed Energy	23 MeV

Because the 10 MeV of neutrino energy shown in Table 7 is not absorbed in the reactor, the average value of 200 MeV per fission is still accurate. Note in Table 6 that some fission neutrons undergo radiative capture and the resultant gamma ray emission provides an additional 10 MeV of instantaneous energy, which contributes to the total of 187 MeV instantaneous energy.

All of the energy released, with the exception of the neutrino energy, is ultimately transformed into heat through a number of processes. The fission fragments, with their high positive charge and kinetic energy, cause ionization directly as they rip orbital electrons from the surrounding atoms. In this ionization process, kinetic energy is transferred to the surrounding atoms of the fuel material, resulting in an increase in temperature. The beta particles and gamma rays also give up their energy through ionization, and the fission neutrons interact and lose their energy through elastic scattering. Of the 200 MeV released per fission, about seven percent (13 MeV) is released at some time after the instant of fission. When a reactor is shut down, fissions essentially cease, but energy is still being released from the decay of fission products. The heat produced by this decay energy is referred to as "decay heat." Although decay energy represents about seven percent of reactor heat production during reactor operation, once the reactor is shut down the decay heat production drops off quickly to a small fraction of its value while operating. The decay heat produced is significant, however, and systems must be provided to keep the reactor cool even after shutdown.

### **Summary**

The important information in this chapter is summarized below.

#### **Energy Release From Fission Summary**

- Fission products have some general characteristics in common.
  - They generally decay by  $\beta^-$  emission.
  - The most common mass numbers are grouped near 95 and 140.
- The energy released by fission can be calculated based on the difference in mass between the masses of the reactants before fission and the fission fragments and fission neutrons after fission.
- Another method to determine the energy released by fission is based on the change in binding energy per nucleon between the fissile nuclide and the fission products.

**INTERACTION OF RADIATION WITH MATTER**

*Different types of radiation interact with matter in widely different ways. A large, massive, charged alpha particle cannot penetrate a piece of paper and even has a limited range in dry air. A neutrino, at the other extreme, has a low probability of interacting with any matter, even if it passed through the diameter of the earth.*

EO 5.1 DESCRIBE interactions of the following with matter:

- |                   |             |
|-------------------|-------------|
| a. Alpha particle | c. Positron |
| b. Beta particle  | d. Neutron  |

EO 5.2 DESCRIBE the following ways that gamma radiation interacts with matter:

- a. Photoelectric effect
- b. Compton scattering
- c. Pair production

**Interaction of Radiation With Matter**

Radiation can be classified into two general groups, charged and uncharged; therefore, it may be expected that interactions with matter fall into two general types. Charged particles directly ionize the media through which they pass, while uncharged particles and photons can cause ionization only indirectly or by secondary radiation.

A moving charged particle has an electrical field surrounding it, which interacts with the atomic structure of the medium through which it is passing. This interaction decelerates the particle and accelerates electrons in the atoms of the medium. The accelerated electrons may acquire enough energy to escape from the parent atom. This process, whereby radiation "strips" off orbital electrons, is called ionization. Uncharged moving particles have no electrical field, so they can only lose energy and cause ionization by such means as collisions or scattering. A photon can lose energy by the photoelectric effect, Compton Effect, or pair production.

Because ionizing radiation creates ions in pairs, the intensity of ionization or the specific ionization is defined as the number of ion-pairs formed per centimeter of travel in a given material. The amount of ionization produced by a charged particle per unit path length, which is a measure of its ionizing power, is roughly proportional to the particle's mass and the square of its charge as illustrated in the equation below.

$$I = \frac{m z^2}{\text{K.E.}}$$

where:

$I$  is the ionizing power

$m$  is the mass of the particle

$z$  is the number of unit charges it carries

K.E. is its kinetic energy

Since  $m$  for an alpha particle is about 7300 times as large as  $m$  for a beta particle, and  $z$  is twice as great, an alpha will produce much more ionization per unit path length than a beta particle of the same energy. This phenomenon occurs because the larger alpha particle moves slower for a given energy and thus acts on a given electron for a longer time.

### **Alpha Radiation**

Alpha radiation is normally produced from the radioactive decay of heavy nuclides and from certain nuclear reactions. The alpha particle consists of 2 neutrons and 2 protons, so it is essentially the same as the nucleus of a helium atom. Because it has no electrons, the alpha particle has a charge of +2. This positive charge causes the alpha particle to strip electrons from the orbits of atoms in its vicinity. As the alpha particle passes through material, it removes electrons from the orbits of atoms it passes near. Energy is required to remove electrons and the energy of the alpha particle is reduced by each reaction. Eventually the particle will expend its kinetic energy, gain 2 electrons in orbit, and become a helium atom. Because of its strong positive charge and large mass, the alpha particle deposits a large amount of energy in a short distance of travel. This rapid, large deposition of energy limits the penetration of alpha particles. The most energetic alpha particles are stopped by a few centimeters of air or a sheet of paper.

### **Beta-Minus Radiation**

A beta-minus particle is an electron that has been ejected at a high velocity from an unstable nucleus. An electron has a small mass and an electrical charge of -1. Beta particles cause ionization by displacing electrons from atom orbits. The ionization occurs from collisions with orbiting electrons. Each collision removes kinetic energy from the beta particle, causing it to slow down. Eventually the beta particle will be slowed enough to allow it to be captured as an orbiting electron in an atom. Although more penetrating than the alpha, the beta is relatively easy to stop and has a low power of penetration. Even the most energetic beta radiation can be stopped by a few millimeters of metal.

**Positron Radiation**

Positively charged electrons are called positrons. Except for the positive charge, they are identical to beta-minus particles and interact with matter in a similar manner. Positrons are very short-lived, however, and quickly are annihilated by interaction with a negatively charged electron, producing two gammas with a combined energy (calculated below) equal to the rest mass of the positive and negative electrons.

$$2 \text{ electrons} \left( \frac{0.000549 \text{ amu}}{\text{electron}} \right) \left( \frac{931.5 \text{ MeV}}{\text{amu}} \right) = 1.02 \text{ MeV}$$

**Neutron Radiation**

Neutrons have no electrical charge. They have nearly the same mass as a proton (a hydrogen atom nucleus). A neutron has hundreds of times more mass than an electron, but 1/4 the mass of an alpha particle. The source of neutrons is primarily nuclear reactions, such as fission, but they may also be produced from the decay of radioactive nuclides. Because of its lack of charge, the neutron is difficult to stop and has a high penetrating power.

Neutrons are attenuated (reduced in energy and numbers) by three major interactions, elastic scatter, inelastic scatter, and absorption. In elastic scatter, a neutron collides with a nucleus and bounces off. This reaction transmits some of the kinetic energy of the neutron to the nucleus of the atom, resulting in the neutron being slowed, and the atom receives some kinetic energy (motion). This process is sometimes referred to as "the billiard ball effect."

As the mass of the nucleus approaches the mass of the neutron, this reaction becomes more effective in slowing the neutron. Hydrogenous material attenuates neutrons most effectively.

In the inelastic scatter reaction, the same neutron/nucleus collision occurs as in elastic scatter. However, in this reaction, the nucleus receives some internal energy as well as kinetic energy. This slows the neutron, but leaves the nucleus in an excited state. When the nucleus decays to its original energy level, it normally emits a gamma ray.

In the absorption reaction, the neutron is actually absorbed into the nucleus of an atom. The neutron is captured, but the atom is left in an excited state. If the nucleus emits one or more gamma rays to reach a stable level, the process is called radiative capture. This reaction occurs at most neutron energy levels, but is more probable at lower energy levels.

## **Gamma Radiation**

Gamma radiation is electromagnetic radiation. It is commonly referred to as a gamma ray and is very similar to an x-ray. The difference is that gamma rays are emitted from the nucleus of an atom, and x-rays are produced by orbiting electrons. The x-ray is produced when orbiting electrons move to a lower energy orbit or when fast-moving electrons approaching an atom are deflected and decelerated as they react with the atom's electrical field (called Bremsstrahlung). The gamma ray is produced by the decay of excited nuclei and by nuclear reactions. Because the gamma ray has no mass and no charge, it is difficult to stop and has a very high penetrating power. A small fraction of the original gamma stream will pass through several feet of concrete or several meters of water.

There are three methods of attenuating gamma rays. The first method is referred to as the photo-electric effect. When a low energy gamma strikes an atom, the total energy of the gamma is expended in ejecting an electron from orbit. The result is ionization of the atom and expulsion of a high energy electron. This reaction is most predominant with low energy gammas interacting in materials with high atomic weight and rarely occurs with gammas having an energy above 1 MeV. Annihilation of the gamma results. Any gamma energy in excess of the binding energy of the electron is carried off by the electron in the form of kinetic energy.

The second method of attenuation of gammas is called Compton scattering. The gamma interacts with an orbital or free electron; however, in this case, the photon loses only a fraction of its energy. The actual energy loss depends on the scattering angle of the gamma. The gamma continues on at lower energy, and the energy difference is absorbed by the electron. This reaction becomes important for gamma energies of about 0.1 MeV and higher.

At higher energy levels, a third method of attenuation is predominant. This method is pair-production. When a high energy gamma passes close enough to a heavy nucleus, the gamma completely disappears, and an electron and a positron are formed. For this reaction to take place, the original gamma must have at least 1.02 MeV energy. Any energy greater than 1.02 MeV becomes kinetic energy shared between the electron and positron. The probability of pair-production increases significantly for higher energy gammas.

## **Summary**

The important information in this chapter is summarized below.

### **Interaction of Radiation with Matter Summary**

- An alpha particle deposits a large amount of energy in a short distance of travel due to its large mass and charge.
- Beta-minus particles interact with the electrons orbiting the nucleus of atoms, causing ionization by displacing the electrons. The beta particle loses energy with each interaction. After the beta particle loses enough energy, it is captured in the orbital shells of an atom.
- Positrons interact with matter much the same way as beta minus particles. After the positron has lost most of its energy by ionizing atoms, it is annihilated by interaction with an electron. The electron-positron pair disappear and are replaced by two gammas, each with the energy equivalent of the mass of an electron (0.51 MeV).
- Neutrons interact with matter by elastic scattering, inelastic scattering, or absorption.
- Photoelectric effect is where a gamma interacts with an electron orbiting an atom. The entire energy of the gamma is transferred to the electron, and the electron is ejected from its orbit.
- In Compton scattering a gamma interacts with an orbital electron, but only part of the gamma energy is transferred to the electron. The electron is ejected from its orbit, and the gamma is scattered off at a lower energy.
- In pair-production, a gamma interacts with the electric field of a nucleus and is converted into an electron-positron pair. The gamma must have an energy greater than 1.02 MeV for this to occur.